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If you attend a public elementary school in the United States, chances are you will not experience being taught by an African American male. Yet, research about African American male elementary teachers is rare and usually focuses on a pathology of their absence, rather than the experiences that drew and retain them in the profession. In order to add to the scholarly discourse of why African American males choose to become and remain elementary teachers, this study utilizes portraits to delve into the lived experiences of three African American male elementary teachers.

During the study, participants shared their life stories, which were recorded across a series of in-person interviews. The study found that African American male elementary teachers are scholarly pedagogists who are beneficial for educating all students regardless of race or gender, but who are also sometimes perceived as behavioral specialists. What is more, sometimes African American males' desire to serve as role models for their students reinforces stereotypes of them as ideal stand-in fathers, primarily for African American students and particularly African American boys. Additionally, the study reveals the various nontraditional pathways by which African American males enter the teaching profession, as well as strategies universities and school districts can use to increase the number of African American males who become highly effective elementary teachers. Lastly, the study explores the social, emotional, and financial challenges

African American male elementary teachers face and why some refuse to let fear and other's misconceptions keep them out of the classroom.

EXPLORING WHY AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES CHOOSE TO TEACH IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: THREE PORTRAITS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many times, members of marginalized groups are not allowed to have their voices heard, because of power structures that implicitly or explicitly work to silence them. As such, I believe anytime African American males are participants in research that gives them a platform for sharing their experiences as elementary teachers, regardless of universal acceptance of their perceptions, adds to scholarly discourse. Throughout this study, I reference elementary students, schools, and teachers, as well as early childhood education and educators. For my research, elementary and early childhood include pre-kindergarten through fifth grade.

I believe my study will add to the discourse surrounding power and knowledge in educational research, by allowing my participants to share their perceptions of who holds and controls access to knowledge in elementary schools. I am not suggesting that interviewing African American male elementary teachers and reporting findings alone is sufficient contribution. However, adding the voices of actual African American male elementary teachers may ignite new ideas for recruiting and retaining African American males to the profession of elementary education. I am encouraged that policymakers and school districts recognize the need to recruit more African American males into elementary education. Still, there is little research focused exclusively on factors that

motivate highly effective African American males to become elementary teachers, and just as important, what factors keep them from leaving their classrooms.

I define highly effective African American male elementary teachers as those whose pedagogy can inspire academic achievement, as well as self-value for all students, not just the ones who look like them. Therefore, my study provides a much needed and long overdue additional source of information for individuals and organizations vying to attract African American males driven to effect societal change through the important work they undertake as teachers in elementary school classrooms.

Research Problem

The lived experiences of African American males who choose to teach elementary school, and their perceptions of why they make up such a small percentage of elementary teachers in the United States is rarely discussed in educational research. This is problematic because there is a large "teacher-student diversity gap" (Ahmad & Boser, 2014, p. 5) in the United States. Yet, few researchers are studying ways to narrow the gap by encouraging more African American males to enter the field of elementary education. Each year the population of students attending public schools in the United States becomes more diverse, while the teacher workforce remains overwhelmingly employed with teachers who do not reflect the racial, gender, and linguistic diversity of their students.

During my career as an operations administrator in a public school district, I have had an opportunity to visit many schools. Each year I walk the hallways and peep my head into classrooms and offices, looking for signs of disrepair or abnormalities of

facilities' structures and mechanical infrastructure. Elementary schools have always been my favorite because there is a guarantee I will receive a friendly smile, wave, high five, or handshake from one of the students there. My primary focus during my school visits is to assess the physical condition of facilities. However, a part of my assessment is to determine how the physical attributes of facilities, contribute to health, safety, and support of educational programming. Consequently, I spend a lot of my time observing the people, students, and staff who occupy the buildings I am responsible for building.

In all my years of meandering through elementary schools, as a student and now as an administrator, I do not recall ever seeing an African American male teaching a subject other than physical education or music. At the time, I did not find it odd, nor did I take issue with not seeing African American males teaching in elementary schools. I, like many others, have grown accustomed to elementary teaching positions being filled by women. When I had children of my own, I did not expect that their teacher would be anyone other than a woman. In fact, for the first four years of my eldest son's enrollment in a public school, all of his teachers were women.

Until I began my doctoral program, I do not remember ever questioning why I had never seen an African American male elementary school teacher. What is more, the absence of African American male elementary school teachers was not a problem for me. In truth, I felt that so long as my child was receiving a quality education, I have no issue with those employed to educate him. Yet, when my eldest son began his fourth-grade year with an African American male teacher, it piqued my curiosity. I wanted to know who he was and why he was teaching elementary students. I do not believe that I have

ever questioned a female elementary teacher's motives for choosing elementary education as a career, but that was not the case for my son's first male teacher, who also happened to be African American.

Although I believe it unfortunate, my experience of never seeing an African American male teacher at my elementary school, and my son's experience of having only one African American male teacher during his 6 years in elementary school, is not an anomaly. There are so few African American male elementary teachers that most students will spend their entire time in elementary school never taught by an African American male. Bryan and Browder (2013) estimate that the number of African American male elementary teachers is fewer than 1%. The absence of African American male elementary teachers is troubling because as Villegas and Irvine (2010) warn, "the racial and ethnic composition of the teaching force sends strong messages to students about the distribution of power in American society" (p. 177). I believe it is important for schools to be centers for democracy and not epicenters of White hegemony. Since the current racial and gender makeup of most elementary schools does not signal an equal distribution of power, it is all the more imperative to sanction more research acutely focused on gross inequalities of teacher-to-student diversity in elementary schools.

Schools should also be where students explore the many occupational options available to them, not where we find reification of society's perceptions of careers as gender and racially specific. There is common acceptance that teaching in general, and at the elementary level, specifically, is an occupation for women. The association of women as elementary educators is partly attributable to the overwhelming number of elementary

teachers who are women. For me, the problem does not lie in the number of elementary teachers who are women, but in the systemic and systematic manner in which teaching as a profession has shifted from domination by White males to dominance by White females at the price of excluding African American males. The trend of intentionally feminizing K-12 education began shortly before the Civil War and continues today.

With the passage of each decade, the number of African American males who enter elementary education shrinks, leaving more African American male students like my sons and me with no visual reference of what could be. This means that unlike the many visual representations of African American males as professional athletes and entertainers, broadcasted almost daily directly into students' homes, only a small percentage of African American males will ever see an African American male teach in their elementary school. I often refer to seeing an African American male elementary teacher as stumbling upon Big Foot, the Loch Ness Monster, or some other mythical being. However, this should not be the case, because African American male students deserve an opportunity to see themselves having a career in elementary education, just as their female classmates do. I believe it is an inequity when African American male students, and others, do not view elementary education as a legitimate career option for African American males.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my research is to examine why African American males decide to pursue elementary education as their career. Although they are present in small numbers, African American males are teaching in elementary schools, and I believe it is time to

magnify their existence by amplifying their voices, and equally important, hearing what they have to say. The lived experiences of African American male elementary teachers can be educational for African American males considering elementary education as a profession, as well as for others who are curious about how some African American males find themselves in what some may consider a non-traditional occupation for men.

Additionally, I hope my participants' stories will illustrate for parents and others like myself, what teaching experience is like for some African American males who teach elementary students. I believe that others like me are curious about seeing African American males teaching elementary school, mostly because they had not experienced African American male teachers during their own years in elementary school. There may be perceptions that African American males are teaching elementary students because they are not smart enough or too lazy to teach at the middle and high school level. Furthermore, others may perceive African American males as unqualified for elementary education, because they view them as incapable of providing a nurturing environment, at least to the degree provided by women.

I believe others like me shaped an image of a typical elementary school teacher as a White female, because of our own experiences as elementary students. I imagine that many others like me never saw an African American male teaching in our elementary school. Yet, I am hopeful that through my participants' stories, people who have not experienced African American male elementary teachers firsthand will gain insight into what teaching elementary students is like for some African American males. I hope African American males will read this study and consider elementary education as a

promising career for them. I also hope that my study will assist universities and school districts in understanding how to recruit, support, and retain African American males in their educational programs and districts.

Research Questions

This study answers the following research question: Why do African American males desire to teach elementary students? A secondary question is: What are the lived experiences of African American male elementary teachers? As part of the study, I wanted to understand what participants believe are the perceptions others have of them and other African American male elementary teachers and what methods they use to create and or maintain positive images of African American men in elementary education. The study also offers opinions by participants as to why they, and other African American male teachers, view themselves as integral to elementary education. In the end, through this study, I hope to provide a better understanding of the motivations and experiences of some African American males who persist as elementary teachers.

My Perspective

In order for readers to understand why this research is important, I am sharing some of my experiences as an African American male elementary student, and as an adult with African American sons who attend elementary school. When I thought back to my experience as an elementary student, I remembered only female teachers at my schools. As a parent, I have only seen one African American male teacher at my sons' elementary school, but never thought much about why that might be. My job requires me to spend a substantial amount of my workday in various elementary schools, and it is on a very rare

occasion that I see African American male teachers. Until recently, the absence of African American male elementary teachers in my life in no way felt abnormal or concerning to me. In fact, the rarity in which I encounter African American male elementary teachers is what sparked my interest in studying the African American men who choose elementary education as their careers.

"You're Nothing But a Nappy-headed Black Boy"

I was in the fourth grade, and that is what my teacher said to me. Thirty years have passed since my teacher, a White woman, irresponsibly spoke those words toward me. I do not recall if my classmates laughed, but I remember my teacher's laugh as she took pleasure in her own disparaging wit, and possibly my pain. I am not certain that at 9 years old I believed I had any recourse to defend myself. My mother taught me to respect my elders and to behave in school, and I knew very well what the consequences would be when I returned home if I got into trouble at school.

What in my short 9 years prepared me for handling this situation? Even now, as an adult, I am not sure I know how I would or should respond, so I am certain the elementary student I was back then did not. I was an elementary student, just like many other elementary students then and now, in need of support and guidance from my teachers. Instead, one of my most vivid memories as an elementary student is when I was ridiculed and humiliated in front of my classmates. Even though I still hurt a little when I think about that episode, I cannot help but think how sad her life must have been to say something like that to a child.

In the community I grew up in, people would say your momma was not taking care of you if you walked around with your hair nappy, so I was hurt that my teacher would suggest I had not combed my hair. I do not recall telling my mother that this exchange ever took place, but as a parent, I can imagine the range of emotions my mother may have felt if she had known. I would have been infuriated that an adult attacked my child in a space meant specifically to provide a safe learning environment. I would have felt helpless in knowing there was nothing I could do to make the racist words, once spoken, unheard by my child. Only now, after all of these years have passed, I ask myself why I withheld something so hurtful to me from my mother. I sometimes wonder if my own two African American sons withhold instances of racial bigotry they experience from their mother and me.

Unfortunately, so many years have passed since the incident that I can only speculate about the reasoning behind my silence. I may have been silent from embarrassment for myself, or maybe I was embarrassed for what I believed the teacher's comment said about my mother. There is a good chance that I was embarrassed for myself and my mother. Regardless of my reason for not telling my mother about what the teacher said, the fact remains that teachers should never speak to children in ways that marginalize them because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion.

Sometimes I wonder if my teacher had been an African American male, would he have had an appreciation for my tightly coiled hair, which I so proudly display today. Would an African American male teacher have been ready, willing, and able to protect me from cruel and malicious racial connotations associated with an African American's

physical appearances? Maybe if my father had seen me taught by an African American male, he would have added elementary school teacher to the list of doctor, lawyer, and engineer—the three careers he would often tell me in which African Americans could excel. Despite my musing of what could have been, the reality is that I like so many other African American male elementary students, may never know the answers to my questions because there are so few African American male elementary teachers.

My time as an elementary student has long come and gone, but there are many other African American boys, like my sons, who could have the opportunity to learn from African American elementary teachers. Therefore, I believe the more pertinent question to ask African American male elementary teachers is what is it about their lived experiences that led them and keeps them in the field of elementary education. I was interested to learn whether the African American male elementary teachers who participated in my study had similar experiences as I did as an elementary student and if there was someone or something that inspired them to become elementary teachers.

They Don't Need Saviors, They Need Teachers

Despite the negative instance with the elementary teacher I wrote about, overall, I remember my experience as an elementary student as being pleasant. I split my 6 years as an elementary student evenly between two schools and do not recall either of my elementary schools having African American male teachers. In fact, though I remember African American women elementary teachers at both schools, I do not recall any of my elementary teachers ever being anything other than White women. Throughout my time as a K-12 student, my class placement has always been with other "above average"

students. I can only speculate, but I concluded that the practice of assigning above-average students to White teachers was consistent at both the elementary schools I attended, which resulted in me only having White female teachers my entire time as an elementary student. I believe my experience as an elementary student taught exclusively by White women normalized the absence of African American male elementary teachers for me. As a result, by the time I became a parent, I had no reason to expect my sons' elementary teachers to be anyone other than women.

Admittedly, at one time, I viewed the primary purposes of males who worked or volunteered in elementary schools was to serve as disciplinarians and role models. Since at home I was the disciplinarian and role model, my sons did not need a stand in like African American boys reared by single mothers. Even though a single mother reared me, and despite there being plenty of male role models in my life outside of school, without much thought I bought into the preconception that the most likely scenario for the vast majority of African American boys was that male role models were absent from their lives. However, I felt a sense of arrival to a status in society that differentiated my sons from other African American boys in elementary schools. To me, an African American male elementary teacher for my sons was inconsequential. I read to my sons, snuggled up with them to watch movies, and taught them how to play with every kind of ball imaginable. When my sons found themselves in trouble, I was there to teach them right from wrong, and protect them from harm. Hence, my sons did not need saviors at schools; they just needed teachers.

I believe myself to be competent and fully committed to being an active father in my sons' lives; still, I felt something was missing from the lives of some other African American male elementary students. Therefore, when I became an adult, I started volunteering at elementary schools as a role model for "troubled" African American boys. After all, the troubled African American male student was a label I once carried, and now I could stand as an example of success for students with similar life experiences. I felt proud of myself for taking time out from my busy day to spend time with those poor boys who were not as fortunate as my sons were to have a father like me in their home.

As soon as principals told me their students had a behavioral problem, I immediately concluded there was not a respectable man like me in their life. As such, when I visited students' classrooms, I always wore a suit and tie. I wanted them to see what I believed to be a positive image of an African American man, which I was sure they did not see at home. When I greeted the students, I looked them in the eye, gave them a firm handshake, and asked them how they were doing that day. I planned to model gentlemanly behavior for the misguided students, which I concluded would translate into better classroom behavior on their part.

There was one African American male student in particular that I remember mentoring, because he was the same age and in the same grade as my oldest son. They were both in the third grade at the time and, so I was somewhat familiar with the curriculum my mentee was learning. I would come by the school each week and check in with the principal about my mentee's progress, before heading down to the classroom to see him. My checking in with the principal about my mentee's mood beforehand proved

to be a good strategy, because sometimes when I came to visit, my mentee was so upset that he was inconsolable.

On the days when my mentee was upset, we would still go to one of the offices up front and sit quietly until he was ready to talk. Even though it might take him a while to open up to me, I believe he was happy to see me come each week and take him from his classroom. Most weeks when I came to get my mentee, I would knock on the door, poke my head in to say hello to the teacher, and ask if it was all right to take my mentee. Every week my mentee's teacher would say yes, so he would grab whatever work the class was working on, and we would head back up front to the office to work and talk.

One week I decided to sit in on my mentee's class because I wanted to see how he interacted with the rest of his classmates. I also wanted to see how my mentee interacted with his teacher, who seemed pleasant and was always nice to me when I saw her. My mentee's teacher was a White female, who appeared to me to be in her mid- to late-20s. On the day of my in-class visit, I took my seat next to my mentee near the front of the classroom and began observing what was happening. As I sat in what felt to me like a miniature seat, I was in complete shock by what I saw. There was trash all over the floor, and the room felt disorganized. The students were roaming around aimlessly while the teacher sat at the front of the room, trying to review the lesson on an overhead projector.

I felt paralyzed and confused. I did not know what, if anything, I should do to bring order to what looked to me like chaos. Unsure of my role in the classroom setting, I decided to focus my efforts on helping my mentee with the lesson. I was willing to help other students if they came over to me and asked, but I did not feel right about inserting

myself into the instruction. There were close to 20 students in the class, mostly male, and all African American. I thought to myself, “these students are not engaged at all!” but the teacher never said a word to redirect them. The teacher kept teaching her prepared lesson while the students laughed and talked with one another.

It became clear to me why both my mentee and the teacher were happy to see me come each week. My mentee was glad for an hour of reprieve, and the teacher was equally pleased to have her roster reduced by one. I felt sorry for them both. However, would I feel the same sadness if the teacher was an African American male? When I replace the young White female teacher in my mind with an African American male, it is not sadness I feel, but disappointment and shame. In reality, I thought about excuses for why the chaos of the classroom was not all the fault of my mentee’s teacher. There were too many students. My mentee’s teacher looked young and inexperienced, so she should have had support because the wily students knew they could take advantage of their teacher’s inexperience.

Yet, when I imagined my mentee’s teacher as an African American male, none of the previous excuses came to mind. Even though in the moment I was unsure of how to bring the students to order, I believed that an African American male teacher should know exactly what to do to take control of an unruly class. If an African American male teacher allowed his students to carry on the way my mentee’s teacher had, I would consider him weak and ineffective. To be clear, I consider my mentee’s White female teacher ineffective too; however, I view her attempt to teach through the distractions somehow redeeming. However, I afforded no such opportunities for redemption for my

imagined African American male teacher and fully expected him to establish himself as the authority figure in the classroom before giving any thought to teaching.

I neither believe that I am the only one who experienced situations in schools like those that I described above, nor am I the only one who has unfairly placed expectations on African American male teachers that would be different if they were of another race and or gender. As enlightened as I portend to be, I found myself relegating the African American male teacher I had imagined primarily to the role of disciplinarian. Though I knew in my mind that, like other teachers, an African American male teacher's primary responsibility is to educate, for me, their pedagogy was still an afterthought to their expected classroom management expertise. As such, I believe it is important to hear from African American male elementary teachers, their thoughts about how others perceive them. What value do African American male elementary teachers believe they bring to their students, and how does their belief differ or align with their perception of how others define their value?

My Boys Have a Father at Home

Since becoming a father, I visit my sons' elementary school often. Each time I am on the school's campus, I cannot help but look around to see the condition of the exterior and interior of the building. I attribute my need to inspect school facilities to the many years I have been working in the field of school facilities management. Nonetheless, as a father, my focus extends beyond reconnaissance of structural and aesthetic building flaws, and I place more emphasis on the people who work inside the building.

In the 7 years that one or both of my sons attended their elementary school, I saw three male teachers. Currently, there are only two male teachers at the school. One of the male teachers teaches music and is White. The other male teaches fifth grade and is Latino. The third teacher was an African American male who taught my oldest son when he was in the fourth grade, but the teacher no longer works at the school. Despite the small number of males at my sons' elementary school, I had no cause for concern with an absence of African American male teachers, because my boys had a father at home.

Until recently, I did not think about why I rarely saw men, especially African American men, teaching elementary school students. If anything, I expected my sons' teachers to be women like the teachers who taught me in elementary. For the first 4 years of my oldest son's elementary education, my expectations were reality. Unlike me, my eldest son attended the same elementary school from kindergarten through fifth grade. Also differing from my elementary experience was the racial composition of his teachers. My son attended a global language magnet school that boasted having many of its teaching staff employed as visiting teachers from all over the world. As a result, my son was able to experience the diversity of race, culture, customs, and linguistics. What had not changed since my time in elementary school was that through the third grade, all my oldest son's teachers were women. However, when my oldest son began the school year as a fourth-grader, his teacher was an African American male teacher. When I learned my son's fourth-grade teacher was an African American male, I was both excited and curious, and could not wait to meet him.

For some parents, and maybe some teachers at the school, my son's fourth-grade teacher was somewhat of a hero, daring to do what only an African American male can do with a classroom full of African American boys. I, on the other hand, was elated, not because my son needed a hero, but because my son would have someone teaching him who was relatable. Without ever speaking to my son's teacher, I believed his teacher possessed a secret pedagogy, which would keep my son so engaged academically that calls home about behavior would subside. After all, my son's teacher was an African American male, so I thought he would naturally know how to teach rambunctious African American male elementary students. Without question, I immediately surmised there would be an improvement in the quality of my son's education because his teacher was the same race and gender that he was. What is more, I felt confident in my prediction that my son's fourth-grade teacher would improve his educational experience, because his teacher was also the same race and gender as me. Now that I reflect on my presumption that there were innately apt pedagogical abilities possessed by my son's African American male teacher, maybe I was also seeing the hero I believed others saw through the lens of their own naïveté.

Another explanation was that I gave my son's first African American male teacher the benefit of not doubting him because of my own experiences with people doubting my abilities in my profession. Nonetheless, in my own mind, I in no way wanted to question the acumen of another African American man who found himself in a nontraditional role. I thought to myself that I was not going to be one of the parents who stare deeply at the academic credentials placed prominently outside the classroom door,

as if I had the knowledge or authority to authenticate their validity. Instead, I chose to allow my son's teacher to speak with me directly about how he planned to care for and teach my son.

Juxtaposed to previous parent-teacher conferences, when I met with my son's African American male teacher, I felt I could speak more freely without fear of perpetuating the stereotype of an "aggressive Black man." Until this point, my wife communicated the most with our sons' teachers. I saw elementary schools as somewhat of a free daycare, where my sons would receive an extension of the nurturing they received from their mother at home. I reason my beliefs stemmed from my experiences with elementary schools almost entirely staffed by women. I now know that I, like so many others, accepted the stereotype of elementary education as a profession for women. Nonetheless, with the arrival of my son's first African American male teacher, came a more liberated voice of advocacy in my child's education.

Now, I had a partner at school who could reify what I was teaching my son at home about being an African American male in America. Other parents may have concerns with an African American male teaching their child in elementary school, but I was feeling confident that my son was going to have a great year, and he did. Each Wednesday my son and his classmates would dress up—girls in dresses and boys in shirts and ties. The weekly ritual of dressing up on Wednesdays became one of my oldest son's favorite things about school.

Besides his new interest in wearing shirts and ties, my son also became more interested in his grades. My son had always done well academically in school, which I

attribute to his natural abilities and persistent parents. However, my son's attitude about the importance of education in helping him to reach his life goals seemed to change in the fourth grade. For the first time, my son was consistently hearing how important education is from an African American male other than me. Like many other things in life, hearing something from people other than their parents can have a greater impact on children's lives. When I asked my son, now in the sixth grade, what he missed most about his fourth-grade teacher, he told me, "he was cool." When I asked him what he meant by cool, he said, "he just gave me a good feeling, you know?"

Existing Research

Though studies specifically aimed toward researching why African American males choose to become elementary teachers are rare, there are scholars like Dawn N. Hicks Tafari (2018) who explicitly seek to understand the phenomenon. Others often chronicle the experiences of African American male elementary teachers as part of a pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade collective. Whether the emphasis was on the harmful effects that the absence of African American male elementary teachers has on all students or the unique adversity they must overcome because of the intersectionality of their race and gender, the phenomenon was often critiqued from a what I consider a negative vantage point. For me, a common and troubling theme arising across studies was the stress African American male elementary teachers experience due to "gendered racism" (Hicks Tafari, 2018; Johnson-Bailey, Ray, & Lasker-Scott, 2014; Schwing, Wong, & Fann, 2013). I believe gendered racism stress is an appropriate description to consolidate the common research themes, which describe the negativity African American male

elementary teachers experience, distinctly because of their race, gender, and chosen profession.

In their research about how culturally relevant play as students can inspire African American males to become teachers, Bryan and Jett (2018) share the narrative of Tal, an African American male kindergarten teacher, who recalled "imitating pedagogical practices he picked up from his mostly White female early childhood teachers" (p. 101). While Tal credits his decision to become an elementary teacher as an adult partially to his playing a teacher as a child, it is important to note that he patterned himself after his elementary teachers who were mostly White women. Like Tal, many African American boys will go through elementary without ever encountering an African American male teacher, thereby perpetuating "normative conceptions of masculinity" (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014, p. 10) that define and pre-arrange heterosexual masculinity for Black men (Hawkins, 1998a).

Bryan and Jett (2018) assert that socially constructed "heteronormative ideologies, gender roles and expectations, and gender-specific occupations" (p. 103) can harm African American boys' willingness to play in roles that they perceive as for girls, which in turn can contribute to them deciding not to teach in elementary schools as adults. They go on to say that teachers and family members may discourage African American boys from role-playing as teachers because of their own preconceptions that "most male teachers who work with young children are generally perceived as gay, suspicious, perverted, or weird" (Bryan & Jett, 2018, p. 103). Though this was not the case for Tal, given the miniscule number of elementary teachers who are African

American men, I believe there is a compelling argument that suggests the "quintessentially feminine domain" (Bryan & Jett, 2018, p. 103) of elementary education can discourage African American males from becoming elementary teachers. African American males have historically been negatively stereotyped as hyper-masculine because of their race and gender, which makes them especially susceptible to stress resulting from employment in careers like elementary education that some consider more appropriate for women.

What is more, White women dominate the number of teaching positions in public elementary schools, accounting for 71% of the workforce (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). As a result, when African American males are present as teachers in elementary schools, they stand out because of both their race and their gender. Bryan and Browder (2013) conducted a case study of an African American male kindergarten teacher named Henry, in which "hyper-visibility" emerged as the main theme (p. 148). Bryan and Browder (2013) attributed Henry's hyper-visibility to not only his race and gender, but also to the context of his occupation as an elementary teacher. For instance, if Henry was a running back in the National Football League (NFL), his race and gender would not single him out. However, because Henry is an African American man teaching a kindergarten class, his race and gender are "always at the forefront of his experiences" (Bryan & Browder, 2013, p. 150). Bryan and Jett (2018) reasoned that hyper-visibility begins early in the lives of African American males, because from the time they are boys, their "play is hyper visible, overly surveilled, and criminalized" (p. 104). To further support their claim that it is the combination of Henry's

race, gender, and occupation that produces his hyper-visibility, Bryan and Browder (2013) posit that "if Henry were a White male, his presence may have been better received in a predominantly White female space" (p. 153) such as the kindergarten classroom in which he taught.

So why do African American males continue to teach in elementary schools, when there is an erroneous perception that their "laps are a place of danger" for students, and their very presence is "considered to be threatening and intimidating to teachers and parents" (Lynn, 2006, pp. 2499–2500)? Why would men like Tal and Henry subject themselves to the scrutiny and stress involved with such a low-paying career? I believe some African American men choose elementary education as their career because of the encouraging themes of role modeling, giving back to the community, and transforming society's view of African American males into a positive light, which I found throughout existing literature. My review of existing literature revealed how researchers use composite counter-story telling, narratives, and portraits to "amplify the voices of Black male teachers" (Hicks Tafari, 2015, p. 93) and convey the positive aspects of elementary schools having African American males present as teachers in their classrooms.

One common theme in studies conducted by Hicks Tafari (2015, 2018) and Lynn (2006) was the desire for African American male elementary teachers to "give back" (Lynn, 2006, p. 2504) or "be of service" (Hicks Tafari, 2015, p. 97) to someone other than themselves led them to teaching from other careers. Hicks Tafari (2015) had a study participant named Matthew who washed cars and worked at a limousine service before becoming an elementary teacher, and Lynn (2006) had a participant named Mr. Jamison

who sold insurance and tutored part-time. Matthew and Mr. Jamison both experienced what Hicks Tafari (2015) describes as a "transformation of the self" (p. 97) in which they began to feel an increased desire to give back to others through teaching.

I liken the desire Matthew and Mr. Jamison felt pulling them towards teaching, to how I have heard ministers refer to their "call" by God to preach the gospel, or how Bauman (1993) described the "moral call" (p. 60) of the Other. For Matthew and Mr. Jamison, as well as many other African American male elementary teachers, they feel their call to give back extends further than pedagogy and encompasses what Hicks Tafari (2018) says is their "work to be somatic otherfathers for their students" (p. 9). Hicks Tafari (2018) defines "somatic otherfathering" as "the mentoring and supportive guidance that happens by the hands of someone who is physically present, like the teacher who mentors his student above and beyond his instructional responsibilities" (p. 5).

The study participants in both of Hicks Tafari's (2015, 2018) studies and Lynn's (2006) study discuss how their "otherfathering," or acting as role models, is an important reason for why they became elementary teachers. Another similarity between the studies' participants was that they did not have African American male otherfathers to inspire them to become elementary teachers, but African American women. Even Tal drew his inspiration to become a teacher from the female teachers in his life. However, would African American boys be more likely to engage in role-playing as teachers, when they imitate teachers who look like them? If so, the presence of African American male elementary teachers, especially due to their positionality as ambassadors of education

early in their students' lives, can be pivotal in shaping their students' perceptions of elementary education as a career for which African American men are equally as suitable as women.

Study Methodology

I used portraiture as the study's research methodology. I chose portraiture as the research method because I believe it offers the best means to study and share the lived experiences of African American male elementary teachers. I also believe that portraiture, through its storytelling features, extends the appeal of my research topic to a wider readership than some other research methodologies. Since there are few studies of African American male elementary teachers in existence, there is limited knowledge available from their lived experiences, which interested parties may use to bolster the effectiveness of their recruitment and retention strategies. My goal is for my study participants' portraits to add substantively to educational research in a manner that is understandable to laypeople, inspire subsequent examination, and call the reader to not only reflect, but also take action to implement policies to grow the number of highly qualified African American male elementary teachers (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in critical race theory (CRT) because of its dual perspective of research as a means to assemble and critique knowledge used for scholarly discourse, as well as for actively engaging its practitioners in pursuing racial justice. It is important for me that my research has a purpose beyond fulfilling doctoral degree requirements. By rooting my study in critical race theory, I am hopeful that my

participants' stories will translate into actionable recommendations, which will contribute to increasing the number of highly effective African American male elementary teachers recruited and retained in America's public school districts. In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss how four of the basic tenets of critical race theory, as described by Delgado and Stefancic (2012), relate to my study of African American male elementary teachers.

Racism is Ordinary

One of the tenets of Critical Race Theory is the "ordinariness" of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). I wrote earlier that until recently I did not view the absence of African American male elementary teachers as out of the ordinary. In fact, when I see African American male elementary teachers, I am decidedly more curious about why they chose elementary education as their profession than why so few other African American males do not choose to become elementary teachers. My experiences as an elementary student, an individual working in the field of education, and now as the father of elementary students, has taught me to think of elementary teachers as female; and in my experience, more often than not, White women. Therefore, when I visit elementary schools devoid of African American male teachers, it is ordinary to me.

On the contrary, if I were to happen upon an elementary school comprised of mostly African American male teachers, I would immediately perceive the phenomena as an anomaly. Hence, I once viewed elementary education as a normal occupation for White women, but abnormal for African American men. Others who share my previously held perceptions of the appropriate attributes of an ordinary elementary teacher may also find nothing wrong with elementary classrooms absent of African American male

teachers. Yet, through the theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory, I have come to understand that what we sometimes take for granted as ordinary is actually racism at work.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) stated that racism is difficult to recognize and combat when disguised as everyday occurrences, such as when elementary schools are overwhelmingly staffed with White women. There are blatant forms of racism, like discriminatory hiring practices, which may contribute to so few African American male elementary teachers. However, the ordinariness of the positionality of Whiteness having authority over the dissemination of education contributes in far more subtle, consequential, and systemic ways. Critical Race Theory acknowledges and seeks to dismantle the discrimination experienced by marginalized groups, by focusing attention on racism cloaked in what people may come to perceive as ordinary events, and acting to empower the disenfranchised.

Interest Convergence

The second tenet discussed by Delgado and Stefancic (2012) is interest convergence, which is the idea that some White people address racial injustice to advance, and not retract their position of dominance in society. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) posit that "Little happens out of altruism alone" (p. 22), which suggests to me that there are possible ulterior motives for addressing racial injustice in elementary schools through initiatives to hire more African American male teachers. In Bell's (1980) review of Professor Herbert Wechsler's criticism of the "legal appropriateness and principled shortcomings" (p. 520) of the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, he

cites Professor Charles Black as concluding that White people must surrender the privileges granted them by racism in order for African Americans to experience true equality. If we are to accept Delgado and Stefancic's and Professor Black's conclusions as plausible, then there may be other reasons than an attempt to improve educational outcomes for students of color that incentivize White people to advocate the recruitment of African American males as elementary teachers.

Until now, I had not thought about whether some White people have ulterior motives for supporting the recruitment of African American males as elementary teachers. In truth, I feel somewhat uncomfortable questioning the intent behind an agenda that I believe is beneficial for students like my sons. Nonetheless, I intend to explore the recruitment efforts directed towards my study participants, and if they ever viewed those efforts skeptically. I am curious if my participants will share the views of Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, who argued "the so-called 'allies' of Black people would prove unreliable when a conflict of interest arises" (as cited in Cashin, 2005, p. 270). I wanted to know if my participants believed White people they interact with, such as parents and administrators, will support them when they challenge White hegemony in their schools.

I believed it was important for my participants to share their thoughts about why they believe policymakers and others create initiatives directly targeting African American males for employment as elementary teachers. Milner (2008) describes interest convergence as a binary choice for White people, who must be willing to forgo their own "power, privilege, esteem, social status . . . and their ability to reproduce these benefits

and interests to their children and future generations" in place of "more equitable policies and practices" (p. 334). If my study participants viewed themselves as tangible evidence of policies and practices designed to bolster equity in elementary education, then I believed it was fair to ask my participants how they may also see themselves as possibly simultaneously contributing to improving the positionality of the same people who already benefit greatly from the privileges they enjoy in society. Equally important to research were how my participants cope with the perceptions of some White people that an increase in hiring African American male elementary teachers is akin to pilfering the "fully privileged and earned position" (Milner, 2008, p. 335) of qualified White female teachers.

Social Construction and Differential Racialization

Another tenet of Critical Race Theory is that society created the different categories of races, which in reality do not link to the biological or genetic makeup of individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Richeson & Sommers, 2016; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). What is more, social constructs precipitate the notion of certain careers being associated with a particular gender and or race. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) say, "racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs" (p. 21). How social constructs of gender and race connect to occupations is an important question I sought to answer through my study.

The small percentage of African American males that make up the elementary teaching corps suggests to me that society does not view elementary education as a customary occupation for them. When I imagine elementary teachers, young to middle

age White women almost immediately comes to my mind. This is because long before I ever stepped foot in an elementary school classroom, society had selected which gender and race would be representative of an elementary teacher; my vision is actually a reflection of society's predeterminations. Richeson and Sommers (2016) explain my perceptions of what a typical elementary teacher looks like as shaped by "a number of sociocultural and psychological factors" (p. 444).

The stereotypes associated with career appropriateness may reify some people's "beliefs about race" (Richeson & Sommers, 2016, p. 444), but the race affiliated with stereotypes may also change over time. In the late 18th century, there were three main categories of races in the United States, which were European Whites, Native Americans, and Black slaves from Africa (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Since that time, there have been people from around the world who immigrated to the United States. While the most distinguishable characteristic remained Black and White skin tones, the designation of which groups fit the description of being Black or White changed.

Richeson and Sommer (2016) describe "racial categorization" as being malleable, because of the tendency for groups' not previously classified ability to receive classification later. By 2010, the United States Office of Management and Budget had begun recognizing 100 racial ethnic possibilities, which was an expansion far beyond the five categories they identified in 1978 (Richeson & Sommers, 2016). Another example of the malleability of racial categorization is that over time, some groups can obtain higher status and more privileges by adjoining the White grouping. Smedley and Smedley (2005) discuss how despite their white skin, southern and eastern Europeans were

initially considered as separate races, but "were eventually assimilated into the 'White' category" (p. 20).

Though some groups have been able to assimilate and identify as White, their membership may not be permanent. Richeson and Sommers (2016) gave an example of how Arab Americans lost their classification of White following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Still, other groups, like Latinos, can "identify as White, Black, or neither" (Richeson & Sommers, 2016, p. 442) when completing official government forms. The fluidity with which groups other than African Americans can move in and out of Whiteness suggests to me that race indeed is socially constructed. Therefore, the careers society attribute to race, especially when it intersects with gender, are also constructs. Using the social construction tenet of critical race theory, I hope the portraits created from the lived experiences of my study participants will dispel negative stereotypes of African American males' pedagogical abilities in elementary classrooms as nothing more than preconceived perceptions, born from socially constructed beliefs that White women are naturally better at educating young children.

The Voice of Color

The last tenet of critical race theory that I used in my study is what Delgado and Stefancic (2012) call "the voice of color" (p. 10), which is sometimes referred to as counter-storytelling. Much of what we think we know about race and gender is from stories that disseminate stereotypes, rather than from our actual experiences. There may be times when we perceive acts by individuals of a certain group as an affirmation of our preconceived ideas about groups as a whole. In reality, we sometimes recall what we

heard previously about the group and apply what we believe to be factual evidence from the past to all current and future encounters with members of that group. Left unchecked, stories can promote biases that lead to what we hear becoming what we believe we experienced for ourselves.

I consider counter storytelling as a useful tool to undo negative perceptions of African American males created and propagated from centuries' old fictional stories. Yet, studies about African American male elementary teachers are rare, which results in many of their lived experiences going untold. Researchers like Bryan and Browder (2013) attribute the lack of exploration into African American male elementary teachers partially to elementary schools' cultivation into spaces dominated by White females. However, it is the rarity of African American male elementary teachers, which is the impetus for recruitment initiatives throughout the United States. I believe it is important for researchers like me to capture the experiences of African American male elementary teachers so that those responsible for advancing recruitment initiatives have diverse and informative data from which to formulate deliberate recruitment and retention strategies.

I chose critical race theory as my theoretical framework because I view its counter storytelling tenet as complementary to the "search for goodness" (Lynn & Jennings, 2009, p. 181) often associated with studies that utilize portraiture as the research methodology. Some researchers consider portraiture and theoretical frameworks like critical race theory to be conflicting. The belief of an inherent conflict by some researchers stems from an interpretation of critical race theory as a framework designed to ask, "what's wrong," whereas portraiture aims to identify the "good" (Lawrence-

Lightfoot, 2005; Lynn & Jennings, 2009). The reason I believed using critical race theory and portraiture methodology together would enhance and not detract from my research is that the portraits may give my audience hope from their reading about sustained good, among all that has gone wrong. I am hopeful that the counter-narratives found within the portraits of my study participants will aid in dispelling the negative stereotypes about African American men, leading to an increase in the number of effective African American male elementary teachers in our schools.

Summary

In summation, critical race theory is a framework that allows researchers to record and analyze the lived experiences of study participants who are a part of marginalized groups, by simultaneously uplifting the voices of the disenfranchised and adding new opinions to scholarly discourse. Hicks Tafari (2018) describes her use of critical race theory as a means to write in a "provocative format" in order to tell the stories of her participants' lived experiences in a manner more "rich and real" for the participants about whom she wrote, and for those who will read her study (p. 7). Other researchers such as Scott and Rodriguez (2015) said critical race theory "illuminates the critical consciousness of people of color," thereby supporting their "ability to communicate life circumstances that their White counterparts are unlikely to know or experience" (p. 696). What is consistent in both Scott and Rodriguez's (2015) and Hicks Tafari's (2018) use of critical race theory as their theoretical framework is that they provide otherwise marginalized participants platforms to have their voices heard through composite counter-storytelling and counter-narratives.

Study Significance

This study is significant because students who attend schools in the United States are becoming more racially and linguistically diverse, but the teaching force is becoming Whiter. Ahmad and Boser (2014) estimate that "eighty-two percent of public school teachers are White" (p. 4), even as G. R. Howard (2007) found that "many school districts nationwide are experiencing rapid growth in the number of students of color, culturally and linguistically diverse students" (p. 1). This phenomenon is particularly true in elementary schools, where White women overwhelmingly fill elementary teacher positions, and African American male teachers are largely absent from elementary classrooms. The study invited African American male elementary teachers, not previously heard from, to participate in discourse for which they have long been the topic. Hearing from study participants provides insight to policymakers, school districts, and universities about experiences that may motivate African American males to choose elementary education as their profession.

Though improving recruitment and retention strategies of African American male elementary teachers is a significant contribution to educational research, this study is significant in other ways as well. Educational research is longing for studies that allow historically marginalized groups to contribute their voice in meaningful ways. Maybe others will develop new and effective methods to consistently recruit and retain African American male teachers because of this research; however, I also believe there is utility in empathy, and as educational researchers, we should not be totally focused on the ability to replicate results.

Brown (2009) cites Booker T. Washington as saying teachers need "proper training of head, hand and heart" (p. 419). Du Bois (2004, 2016) said that it is "not enough that teachers of teachers should be trained in technical normal methods; they must also, so far as possible, be broad minded, cultured men and women" (p. 53). Du Bois (2004, 2016) was commenting on how former slaves needed teachers to receive instruction that extended beyond core subjects like reading or math, and instead cultivated an understanding of "life itself" so they might properly teach a people ascending from bondage whose lives had never been their own. I believe it is time for research in education to help us learn more about the heart of our African American male elementary teachers, for while they may spark "life itself" in their students, they do not appear to ignite the interest of many researchers.

Additionally, this study is significant because the stories of my participants may speak to African American males who see themselves in my participants. When we add the voices of marginalized groups to the conversation, there is a chance that someone else will recognize parts of participants' stories as their own. In turn, we may see a greater interest in African American males wanting to become elementary teachers because of the inspiration they received from reading about my participants' lived experiences. However, even if there is no greater interest by African American males to pursue careers in elementary education because of my study, I hope that the portraits produced from my participants' stories serve as counter-narratives to the negative perceptions held by some of African American males.

Lastly, and I believe most significantly, is the potential of my study to contribute meaningfully to improving the educational experiences of students. None of the study participants are students enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade; however, I hope that the experiences of the participants will be helpful to understand how African American male elementary teachers affect students academically and emotionally. African American male teachers often find themselves positioned in elementary schools as stand-in father figures and disciplinarians, in stark contrast to the positioning of their female counterparts as nurturing educators. What is more, the positioning of African American male elementary teachers as father figures and disciplinarians is more often than not limited to the African American male students considered to be at risk or troubled. Research like this study can assist in understanding from the view of African American males, their beliefs about positioning them and other African American male teachers in elementary schools as father figures and disciplinarians of African American male students. I believe it is important to hear the study participants' perceptions of the effects, if any, of their positioning in elementary schools on their ability to educate all students.

Summary

In this introduction, I shared how my personal experience as an African American male elementary student, and later as the father of African American male elementary students, is the impetus for my interest in why some African American men choose to become elementary teachers. Then I provided an overview of common themes and findings from my review of existing literature. Following my literature review synopsis, I

discussed my plan to use portraits to share why my study participants became elementary teachers and how their lived experiences affected their decision. Next, I informed the reader of my choice to use Critical Race Theory as the study's theoretical framework. Finally, I closed with my reasoning for why the study will significantly contribute to scholarly discourse that seeks to answer why some African American males decide to pursue careers as elementary teachers. A literature review of existing research surrounding African American male elementary teachers follows in Chapter II.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE: HISTORICIZING KNOWLEDGE

> Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.
>
> —George Santayana

This study contains portraits of the lived experiences of African American males who chose to be elementary school teachers and their perceptions of why they make up such a small percentage of elementary teachers in the United States. I care about this topic because of what it says to all students, early in their academic journeys, about who the gatekeepers of knowledge are, and who has the authority to control its dissemination. I also care about this topic because I believe it is important to know why African American males are not choosing elementary education as a career, and just as importantly, reasons why some African American males do.

Although one's choice of career is personal and unique to each individual, such small numbers of African American male teachers in elementary schools across the nation suggest to me that there may be more at play than a lack of interest in education as a profession that contributes to African American males not selecting early childhood education as their preferred profession. According to Bryan and Milton-Williams (2017), only 2% of kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers are African American males; of that amount, approximately half of African American males teach at the elementary level (NCES, 2017).

Regrettably, teacher workforce diversity has been unable to keep pace with student diversity, which results in a large "teacher-student diversity gap" (Ahmad & Boser, 2014, p. 5) in almost every state in America. Based on my own experience previously as a student, a public education administrator, and now as a parent of two African American male elementary students, I expected existing research to confirm my belief that much of early childhood educators are women. Though I was not surprised to discover that women represent most of early childhood educators, I was stunned to learn the degree to which their numbers surpassed their male counterparts.

Overall, males represent "less than 25% of teachers in the United States," and "only 3-5% of teachers of young children are male" (Bryan & Browder, 2013, p. 142). The overwhelming representation of female teachers in Pre-K–5 classrooms, coupled with the almost complete absence of male teachers in those same primary grade levels, suggests there are what Bryan and Browder (2013) describe as "hegemonic forces" that "significantly impact society's perceptions of gender-specific occupations" (p. 143).

Unfortunately, gender imbalance in primary schools has gone largely unaddressed. Bryan and Browder (2013) argue that education researchers do not give adequate attention to the impact of male elementary teachers on student achievement, as is given to other topics in education. As a result, there is "a gap in research and policy on the lived experiences of men in the field of early childhood education" (Bryan & Browder, 2013, p. 144), and African American male teachers in particular. Even when there are studies of male elementary teachers, the studies focus primarily on the experiences of White male subjects, while leaving the benefits and challenges of securing

a larger workforce of African American male primary education teachers unaddressed (Bryan & Browder, 2013).

There are so few African American male elementary teachers that most students progress through primary school without once being taught by an African American male. While unfortunate, it is understandable, considering African American males make up only 2% of teachers in kindergarten through 12th grade (Bryan & Milton-Williams, 2017). Consequently, from their earliest experiences as students, both female and male students learn early on that teaching is a job for women; and White women especially. However, if those same elementary school students were to encounter African American male teachers early and consistently through their schooling, it may begin to deconstruct the social construction of elementary education as a gender-specific occupation (Bryan & Browder, 2013). Deconstruction of gender-specific occupations may, in turn, broaden "visions of who counts as teachers in educational institutions and in the eyes of all students, families, teachers and administrators" (Bryan & Milton-Williams, 2017, p. 210).

Although I could find literature detailing factors that prompted the migration of White men from teaching careers in public education over the last 150 years, literature discussing factors contributing to the small percentage of African American male educators, particularly those who educate at the primary level, has been far more difficult to unearth. According to Bryan and Browder (2013), "studies are rare regarding the experiences of male teachers, particularly Black male teachers," and their "unheard voices . . . can be attributed, in part, to . . . White female-dominated classroom environments" (p. 143). African American male educators' voices are going unheard, and

their bodies are going unseen, by students in American classrooms. The underrepresentation of African American male educators in elementary classrooms is a missed opportunity for schools to demonstrate tangibly to families of an increasingly diverse student body their commitment to extending diversity in all aspects of schooling.

I begin my review of the literature by introducing the reader to the concept of historicizing knowledge and describing how I used it to illuminate the historical context for the race and gender imbalances found within America's elementary schools. First, I examine the transition from staffing public schools almost exclusively with White male teachers in the 19th century, to its present-day configuration, where women represent approximately 90% of early childhood educators (NCES, 2017). I then follow with a discussion centered on the historical and current role race plays in education. In particular, I focus on how negative stereotypes found in popular culture create an environment in elementary schools that create false binary choices of cynicism or heroism, for which to label African American male teachers. Finally, I conclude the chapter by examining the unique challenges and opportunities African American male elementary teachers encounter at the nexus where negative stereotypes of gender and race in early childhood education converge.

Reviewing the Literature: Historicizing Knowledge and African American Male Teachers

Historicizing Knowledge

In the pages that follow, I review existing literature through the lens of historicizing knowledge. Previous researchers used historicizing knowledge to examine how past events undergird, and sometimes perpetuate, what we experience in the present

(Brown, 2012; Popkewitz, 1997). I will use historicizing knowledge to inform the reader of how past measures taken throughout the history of public education contribute to the overwhelming percentage of America's public elementary school teachers being White women.

My review of the existing literature revealed that the history of public education plays a large part in so few African American males teaching in elementary schools. Historicizing knowledge and ethnographic interviews were the two research methods employed by Brown (2012) in his study of how schools and policymakers situate African American male teachers as the primary means to improve academic and behavioral outcomes of African American male students. Brown (2012) used historicizing knowledge to demonstrate how past ideas about how African American male adults' presence in, or absence from African American boys' lives affect thoughts about what roles African American male teachers should play in the lives of their African American male students. Using ethnographic interviews to ask open-ended questions, Brown (2012) gathered qualitative data related to his participants' lived experiences, which resulted in descriptive themes about how African American male teachers viewed their role as educators of African American boys.

Like Brown (2012), I was curious about how negative historical stereotypes about African American males shape our perceptions of their acceptability as elementary teachers today. I intentionally began my literature review with the origin of public schools because I believe it is important to understand that the perception of the teaching profession, particularly elementary education, as a feminine occupation was not always

the reality in America. By historicizing the existing knowledge of the evolution of gender roles in public schooling, I learned of the deliberate nature in which teaching in general, and elementary education in particular, transitioned to its current perceived identity as a feminine career over the past 2 centuries.

Next, I historicized knowledge related to race and access to education in America. For me, existing literature indicates how race was and still is central to whom some believe are deserving of receiving and administering education. I found that the historically negative stereotypes about African American males continue to plague opinions of them as appropriate vessels to deliver education to elementary students. What is more, through historicizing the knowledge of scholarly discourse about race in America, I learned how the deliberate disenfranchisement of African Americans from education in an attempt to bolster White supremacy caused schools to be seen by some African American male students as a hostile environment, which may discourage them from pursuing teaching careers as adults.

Historicizing existing knowledge of gender, race, and their potential combined effect on African American males' decision to become elementary teachers helped me revision the phenomenon of elementary schools devoid of African American male teachers as a pathology symptomatic of the historical design of schools as weapons against African American men, and not as African American males being pedagogically inept. I posit that understanding the histories of African American males and their relationship to public schools in America is essential to researching what attracts some to teach in elementary schools, despite evidence that their employment in careers considered

feminine or unreceptive to African Americans may perhaps produce stress for them not experienced by other races and genders.

As a result, many of our students do not matriculate through elementary school seeing African American male teachers. What is more, those same children grow up to be adults and may never question why their children do not have African American men as their elementary teachers, because as Popkewitz, Diaz, and Kirchgasler (2016) said, "experience and practice are effects of power, historically produced principles that shape the conduct of conduct" (p. 14). In other words, history has a way of repeating itself, continually reifying power for those who have always possessed power. Consequently, African American males may not be present in large numbers as elementary teachers because, throughout history, White people used their power to transform society's perception of their absence as a normal condition of elementary education.

I believe it is important for readers of my research to understand how public school systems have alienated African American male students and teachers throughout history, and how historic alienation has resulted in so few African American male elementary teachers today. Additionally, historicizing knowledge enables a discussion of how views of African American males shifted over time from being "the source of the problem" to becoming the central characters "in improving the social and educational conditions" of African American male students (Brown, 2012, p. 302). Meaning, discourse surrounding negative historical stereotypes often associated with African American males, is necessary for understanding the positioning of African American male teachers as proxies for African American male students' absentee fathers today.

The practice of disqualifying African American males from educational institutions as students and educators has been in existence for centuries, and its replication has continued to the point that exclusionary effects of racism towards African American males in elementary schools have become commonplace. For me, using historicizing knowledge was critical to understanding not only potential reasons many African American males forgo careers as elementary educators, but also the enormous fortitude African American men require when they arrive in their classrooms ready, willing, and able to provide instruction of the highest quality to their students, despite history demonstrating continuous efforts to impugn their ability to do so.

The Teaching Profession's Historical Transition from White Male to White Female Dominance

Many factors may influence the decision of African American males to pursue a career in early childhood education. One of the challenges faced by some African American male teachers is a culture shared by schools and the communities they serve, that early childhood education is best when coupled with the nurturing care of women. The perception of White women as the best early childhood educators has been centuries in the making. Catherine Beecher, sister of the famed author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was an educator who believed home and school were "two naturally feminine realms in which women could nurture the next generation" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 23).

At the beginning of the 1800s, schools comprised of all White students, taught by teachers who were almost exclusively White men, were commonplace, even though single White women were a part of America's teaching corps as early as the 1700s

(Goldstein, 2015; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997). Much of the early years of public education lacked student and teacher diversity, particularly in terms of race and gender, primarily as the result of laws prohibiting the education of Black slaves, but also in large part because so few White women worked outside of the home. Goldstein (2015) writes that only 10% of White women worked outside of the home in the early 1800s. Furthermore, passing over White women interested in teaching in favor of hiring White men was often the case (Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997). However, by the end of the 19th century, White men began leaving the education profession for careers offering higher wages (Goldstein, 2015). Consequently, a career path once dominated by White males had become an increasingly attractive occupation for middle-class White women desiring to work outside of the home.

By the start of the 20th century, women had solidified their presence in schools as educators, and representation by males had receded to one-third of the teaching force (Goldstein, 2015). As the teaching profession became a more acceptable form of employment, particularly for White women seeking to work outside of their homes, it did not take long for White women to begin filling teaching positions vacated by White men. Montecinos and Nielsen (1997) attributed the increase in opportunities for women in the field of education during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to "a fast-growing population, a growing number of educated women, and major social and political changes" (p. 48). Although the nation's population was growing fast, and more women were acquiring higher education, what likely had the largest impact on the decrease in the

number of White male educators, were mortally consequential social and political changes of the time.

Lasting from 1861 through 1865, the Civil War called upon White men, including those who were educators, to leave their occupations and join the military ranks of Northern and Southern troops. Many of the men who left their families and communities never returned home from war. Using census microdata from 1850 through 1880, Hacker (2011) estimates the probable male death toll caused by the Civil War to be between 650 and 850,000. If Hacker's (2011) estimates are accurate, they would equate to "1 in 10 White men of military age in 1860" (p. 311) dying as a result of the Civil War. With so many of their fathers, brothers, and husbands dead or still away at war, the number of White women educators began to increase exponentially. Montecinos and Nielsen (1997) give an account of the rise of White women teachers in Iowa, where in 1865, White women educators "outnumbered their male counterparts three to one," and "accounted for 83% of classroom teachers" by 1900 (p. 48).

At the dawn of the 20th century, the face of education had changed. No longer viewed simply as "custodians of home and morality" (Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997, p. 48), educated White women began to extend their influence beyond their homes, as they grew into what they believed was their "rightful teaching role in the larger community" (Robbins, 2002, p. 82). Even though an image of White women as homemakers remained the prevailing societal view through the mid to late 20th century, teaching in public schools continued to increase in popularity as an acceptable occupation for educated White women. Goldstein (2015) described the teaching profession as elevating White

women “into the public view as workers outside the home” (p. 26), while at the same time allowing them to remain in what Catherine Beecher described as “the prescribed boundaries of feminine modesty” (p. 23).

Feminist educators like Catherine Beecher were not the only early adopters of the belief that the seemingly feminine characteristics of teaching somehow made White women a better fit for the profession of teaching. There were also White male educators, such as Horace Mann and Charles William (C.W.) Bardeen, who were perfectly fine with abdicating the teaching profession to women, whom they believed had long established teaching as their work (Medford, Knorr, & Cook, 2013). While Beecher, Mann, and Bardeen may have all viewed women as better suited for teaching than men because of women’s presumed natural ability to nurture, they all also recognized a practical advantage to filling schools with female teachers.

As the number of public school students began to rise, primarily due to “compulsory attendance requirements” (Medford et al., 2013, p. 15), a low-cost solution for providing teachers became increasingly urgent. In the early 20th century, salaries for male teachers were comparable to that of doctors and lawyers; however, women teachers offered an inexpensive alternative for schools trying to make do with little to no funding (Medford et al., 2013; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997). Catherine Beecher was a vocal proponent of hiring female teachers as a cost-saving strategy (Goldstein, 2015). The result was a win for White women who wished to establish themselves in almost the only respectable career outside of the home for them at the time, as well as for cash strapped schools in need of teachers to serve the boom in student enrollment.

The Perception of Primary Education as a Feminine Occupation

Beecher's assertion that the teaching profession allows females to maintain their "feminine modesty" suggests a feminine quality to teaching, which in turn should make teaching a profession better suited for women. Although the perception of teaching as a feminine profession has continued to increase since the late 1800s, the belief is even starker and prevalent when being discussed concerning teaching primary age students. Bryan and Browder (2013) suggest that "societal expectations view teachers of young children as nurturers" (p. 153), which results in a prevailing and continuously reinforced idea that occupations perceived to require nurturing ability, such as early childhood education, are best when women are at the helm.

To help better understand this widely accepted rationale, as well as the disproportionate number of women who teach in elementary schools, Medford et al. (2013) offer three theories. The first is essentialist theory, which "posits that there are biological differences between males and females that form the basis of socialization models that contribute to an inclination by females in the selection of primary education as a career" (Medford et al., 2013, p. 16). In other words, women are born nurturers almost unwittingly drawn to professions involving young children, such as early childhood education. However, Skelton (2012) suggests that essentialist theory is too narrow and simplistic of a concept to use when trying to understand how society situates males as early childhood educators. Skelton (2012) goes on to say that such "narrow, restrictive constructions of gender which rely on stereotypes" (p. 12) are polarizing, and only serve to push more men away from teaching in elementary schools. L. C. Howard

(2012) adds that such narrow and polarizing descriptions of gender demonstrate an "understanding of masculinity that is anti-feminine and immature" (p. 383). Both Skelton (2012) and L. C. Howard (2012) point to uninformed perceptions of masculine and feminine characteristics as contributing to the social construction of elementary education as a feminine occupation, which in turn has produced a less diverse corps of early childhood educators.

The pressure to maintain societal perceptions of masculinity, while at the same time maintaining the characteristics ascribed to primary school teachers, leave some men feeling out of place in elementary school classrooms. Medford et al. (2013) propose a second theory referred to as gender theory. According to Medford et al. (2013), "gender theory holds that males are uncomfortable filling" roles such as elementary school teachers, and therefore, "shy away from teaching . . . especially in the lower grades" (p. 16). Male elementary teachers may derive part of their uncomfortableness from fear others believe their reasons for teaching primary students are nefarious. Skelton (2012) cites "anxieties around potential accusations of child sexual abuse" (p. 12) as a major concern of male elementary educators. During his research, Bullough (2014) noted how much more cautious his male subject, who was employed as an assistant Head Start teacher, was than the female teacher in the same class. One example Bullough (2014) provided was the difference in how the female and male teacher interacted with the students while wearing the "greeting apron." Both teachers used the greeting apron as a fun way for their students to indicate the type of greeting they wanted to receive that day. For example, if the student wanted a hug, they would point to a picture of a hug on the

apron. Bullough (2014) noticed that while the female teacher would allow the children to touch the greeting apron physically, the male teacher would point to the greeting himself, not allowing the students to make contact with the apron while it was around his waist. The male subject in Bullough's (2014) study felt the need to use an abundance of caution while wearing the apron because of the area the children would touch while he was wearing it. Bullough (2014) described the male teacher as "acutely aware of others' concerns about child abuse, including supposed dangers involved when men work closely with children" (p. 18).

Lastly, Medford et al. (2013) suggest as a third theory as to how the "constructivist's view of . . . gender differences leads to the disparity in the number of males in primary education" because "constructs of masculinity and femininity" are responsible for "leading men away from a career working with young children" (p. 16). There is a risk for men of what Bryan and Browder (2013) describe as "ascription of masculinity," which they define as "assigning a lack of masculinity on men who teach or desire to teach young children" (p. 148). Rosin (2010) attributes the difficulty of recruiting more men as teachers, to a narrowing "range of acceptable masculine roles" (p. 12) in professions such as education, where the number of female teachers far outnumber the number of male teachers.

Therefore, many male elementary teachers find themselves caught in a no-win situation. If they appear to be too masculine, they risk the possibility of people perceiving them as unfit for the job. On the other hand, if they appear too touchy-feely, people may wonder what their "real" motives are for teaching elementary school. Male elementary

school teachers are constantly maintaining a balance between how others view their masculinity, while at the same time exhibiting the nurturing characteristics associated with teaching in elementary schools. Skelton (2012) describes this quagmire as an "irresolvable tension" (p. 12).

A History of Educating Americans of African Descent

Educating African Americans has been a hotly debated topic even before their emancipation. Today, policymakers, educators, and researchers focus their efforts on eliminating the academic achievement gap between African American students and their White counterparts. There have been several explanations born from their collective efforts to close the gulf between the academic performance of African American and White students, which in turn has led to many strategies and initiatives. Ladson-Billings (2006) contends that *the achievement gap* is one of the most commonly found phrases in educational research. Moreover, Ladson-Billings (2006) cited quite a few researchers who provided several plausible causes for the achievement gap, such as "cultural deficits . . . stereotype threat . . . cultural mismatch . . . curriculum . . . , and pedagogical practices of teachers" (p. 4). Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) point to disproportionate disciplinary practices in schools as a potential contributor to the achievement gap. For their part, Lee and Bowen (2006) suggest parental involvement as a probable culprit.

I offer that though real and problematic, the often-researched likely causes of the academic achievement gap are symptomatic of a much deeper and insidious plot to rob African Americans of their liberty through withholding education. What is more, I hold that the large gap in achievement is an indicator that schools are performing just as

designed, and attempts to lessen the span, though admirable, are fraught with setbacks that sometimes results in despair. African Americans have been feeling this despair for centuries, as they watch White students whose capacity to learn equals their own, achieve in school, and subsequently in life.

In the subsections that follow, I discuss the progression of educational opportunities afforded African American males since their enslavement, and how there are efforts at each turn meant to limit or remove education from their lives. I believe the historical attempts to disenfranchise African American males from pursuing education, other than for a trade, contributes to the absence of African American male elementary teachers from classrooms of today. The first subsection covers educating African Americans before their emancipation. The next subsection outlines the inclusion of African Americans into public education after the Civil War. Lastly, I summarize the historical role of African Americans as educators, and how their role has changed since the *Brown v Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision.

Pre-emancipatory Education of Black Slaves

Before their arrival to America on slave ships, Africans had a rich history and reverence for learning, evidenced by their educational institutions. Williams (1883) describes African cities like Meroe and Ethiopia as monuments to "Negro genius and civilization," where "inventive genius and ripe scholarship" was born and later flowed to European countries such as Rome and England (p. 22). Well before their emancipation and later assimilation as Americans, Africans were a people known for their mastery of written and oratory language, established governments, and economic riches. The

academic prowess of Africans was so renowned that Europeans would travel to ancient libraries, like the one found in Timbuktu, to study manuscripts once described by 16th-century traveler Leo Africanus as “more profitable than any other goods” (English, 2017, p. 1; see also Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

Despite originating from an established culture of education, upon arriving in America as slaves, perceptions of Africans as scholars subsided instead of disparaging narratives that cast them as teeming with physical strength, but devoid of intelligence, discipline, and Christian piety. The same “Dark Continent” (Williams, 1883, p. 24) that once illuminated the world with its vast knowledge became the quarry from which colonizers extracted Black bodies to labor in America’s fields of cotton and tobacco. In America, a life of menial labor was the fate for Africans brought as slaves, and their masters did not see a reason to educate them. Williams (1883) describes learning for Black slaves as “the forbidden fruit that no Negro dared taste” (p. 385).

Much like livestock taught to plow fields and haul goods, Black slaves learned only the tasks necessary for them to perform appropriately as chattel. Though not considered chattel, poor White children did not receive much more education than slaves did. The lack of education received by poor White people challenged the theory of White supremacy because it placed some White people on the same intellectual level as slaves (Watson, 2012). Therefore, depriving Black slaves and freedmen of education was not only useful in subjugating their humanity, but it was also important for creating false distinctions between poor White people and Black slaves to protect White hegemony.

Yet, there were some Black people, both free and enslaved, who were fortunate to receive an education in America before the emancipation of slaves. Woodson (1919) noted that as early as 1774, there were schools for Black students in New York and Philadelphia. In New Jersey, a law passed in 1788 made teaching slaves to read mandatory, and masters who did not comply were subject to a fine of five pounds (Woodson, 1919). These "colored schools," as referred to by Woodson (1919), received much of their support from abolitionists. One such abolitionist was John Jay, who worked with several schools in New York that served Black students, which ranked "among the best in the United States" (Woodson, 1919, p. 60) in the late 18th century.

Still, the instances of Black students learning in classrooms during the 1700s was a phenomenon found sparsely within Northern states (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Though some Northern states allowed Black people to receive an education, there were laws "passed to prevent miscegenation" between the Black students, and the White indentured servants often employed to tutor them (Woodson, 1919). In the South, states like Georgia and South Carolina were not inclined to educate Black people and enacted laws that forbade teaching slaves how to read or write (Woodson, 1919).

In the face of statutorily imposed ignorance and malfeasance, there were times when some Black people in America reminded the world of the intellectual acumen once associated with the people of Africa. Benjamin Banneker, whose White maternal grandmother purchased and later married his Black maternal grandfather, was a renowned 18th-century astronomer and philosopher (Williams, 1883; Woodson, 1919). From a young age, Banneker received reading lessons from his maternal grandmother,

but also attended a “pay school” (Williams, 1883, p. 386) in Maryland, which admitted both Black and White students.

Born into slavery in 1762, Dr. James Derham learned to read and write from his master, who was a physician (Williams, 1883). Over the years, Dr. Derham found himself sold to other masters who were also physicians, and he served each of them as an assistant. By the time Dr. Derham secured his freedom, he was able to speak French and Spanish fluently, and at age 26 “was regarded as one of the most eminent physicians in New Orleans” (Williams, 1883, p. 401). Dr. Derham’s story demonstrates how some slaves received education and excelled in occupations requiring mastery of language and physical sciences, which differed from the “practical training” (Woodson, 1919, p. 76) deemed appropriate for Black people at the time.

However, the academic opportunities received by Benjamin Banneker and Dr. James Derham were exceptions to a well-established and widespread rule to strip Black slaves of their humanity. Although there were instances when Black people were able to learn reading and writing in approved school settings, as well as explore careers that relied on mental agility more than physical strength, sanctioned pre-emancipatory education of Black people in most of America was rare. What is more, in order to further subdue Black people and advance White hegemony, government-funded public schools began to emerge to educate poor White children. The achievement gap between African American and White students that educators, policymakers, and educational activists decry today found its debilitating beginnings with the inception of public schools.

Post-emancipatory Education of African Americans

While an increase in publicly funded schools and subsequent employment of White women as teachers was beginning, the Civil War was approaching its conclusion. Southern White people who had once deprived Black slaves of an education, would now debate with their Northern occupiers whether or not the recent freedmen possessed the mental capacity to be educated (Robbins, 2002). This was not the first time that White captors deliberated the necessity of educating their Black captives, once the inevitable day of freedom arrived. Leaders of America's revolt against Britain spoke of their desire to rid America of the "tyranny of men's bodies and minds" (Woodson, 1919, pp. 52–53) perpetuated by slavery by educating Black slaves. Some believed education is an intrinsic right of all men, and without it, true freedom and citizenship were not obtainable (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Woodson, 1919).

In the late 18th century, men like John Woolman and John Locke were pushing for an end to slavery and educating Black slaves as a means to restore their human dignity. In contrast, others like Benjamin Franklin considered education as an avenue to prepare liberated slaves for a life of freedom (Woodson, 1919). According to Allen et al. (2007), "illiterate African Americans were considered a liability to the country" (p. 267) and states that once passed laws forbidding their education came to realize the importance of educating the newly emancipated slaves. However, these states found themselves in a dilemma of having their racist fabrications about the intellect of Black slaves exposed, because the group of people they once proclaimed were "somewhere

between men and cattle" (Du Bois, 2004, 2016, p. 48) upon emancipation would somehow now be on equal footing with White people.

For over a century in America, proponents of slavery pushed false narratives of Black slaves as being subhuman unintelligent brutes, incapable of learning at the level of White people. Now following emancipation, America faced the challenge of preparing former slaves for the responsibilities associated with citizenship, without producing a welfare state. The debate was no longer about if African Americans should receive an education, but what kind of education they should receive. Though liberation released African Americans from physical oppression by their masters, their freedom did not equate to political, economic, and educational equality with White citizens. Still, many people understood that education was the way to provide African Americans with the skills to fend for themselves as free men and women.

Nonetheless, the debate about the fate of educating Black freedmen continued, and questions began to arise regarding what extent African Americans should be educated. Akin to social stereotypes that permeated conversations surrounding gender and education, so too existed social stereotypes encompassing race that influence beliefs about which race is deserving of education, as well as what type of education they should receive. Robbins (2002) refers to those deciding the educational destiny of newly freed Blacks as "White male power brokers" (p. 82). They were men who took it upon themselves to establish terms, conditions, and objectives for how Black freedmen would be educated. Powerful White men from the North and South came together to establish a pecking order for which they were in the top position (Robbins, 2002).

Similarly, the debate also ensued among African Americans about which educational direction was best for the future of the African American community. There were influential leaders in the African American community like author and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, who preferred for African Americans to receive a "liberal education" (as cited in Allen et al., 2007, p. 266). Author, educator, and advisor to Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, Booker T. Washington advocated for educating African Americans with a vocation because he believed it would result in their "economic advancement and self-reliance" (Allen et al., 2007, p. 268). At the time of emancipation, most funding to educate African Americans flowed to schools with vocational curriculums.

Philanthropy that initially appeared to be a promising opportunity for Black freedmen to receive an education was once again an exploitation of Blacks for economic gain. According to Robbins (2002), organizations such as the Peabody and Slater Fund, tied their "educational objectives to the New South emphasis on economic growth" (p. 82). Besides creating an inexpensive and subordinate workforce to replace the institution of slavery, White people also tended to be more supportive of vocational schools because they believed liberal arts education to be "too challenging for Black students," which "would lead to dissatisfaction with lower positions in society" (Allen et al., 2007, p. 267). Therefore, rather than developing curricula for Black freedman comparable to the curricula taught in White schools, emphasis was placed on what the 19th President of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes, described as "manly occupations like those of carpenter, farmer, and the blacksmith" (Robbins, 2002, p. 82). Goldstein (2015) notes

that low academic expectations for newly freed Blacks, such as those expressed by individuals Robbins (2002) described as White male power brokers, continued for decades after the Civil War.

From the onset of African Americans entering the public education system, an expectation of academic underachievement was present and nurtured. The self-reporting nature of literacy census data at the time of Black slaves' emancipation in 1863 makes it difficult to ascertain an accurate count of literate recently freed Black slaves. Even so, the fact that laws dating back to the 18th century made it a crime for Black slaves to be literate, it is safe to say that literacy rates among Black slaves were extremely low at the time of their emancipation. Besides relying on honesty in self-reporting literacy, Collins and Margo (2003) point to reasons such as lack of objective literacy tests, and varying interpretations by evaluators of levels of literacy, as contributing to the difficulty of establishing accurate literacy data for Black freedmen in the years prior and immediately following their emancipation. According to Collins and Margo (2003), the first true national literacy census of African Americans was in 1870. At that time, only 8% of African Americans older than age 10 were literate (Collins & Margo, 2003). However, by 1930, that number had risen to 86% (Collins & Margo, 2003). In the face of virtually total illiteracy upon gaining freedom towards the end of the 19th century, African Americans achieved a 78% increase in literacy, twenty years before the midpoint of the 20th century (Collins & Margo, 2003).

African Americans' literacy was increasing because their attendance at school was increasing. In the years immediately following the conclusion of the Civil War,

White students attended school at a rate of 41 percentage points higher than Black students attended school (Collins & Margo, 2003). Yet, by the late 1930s, school attendance by Black students had risen to within seven percentage points of White student attendance (Collins & Margo, 2003). I believe the dramatic increase in school attendance by African Americans is attributable to their recognizing education as a means to benefit economically, thereby bettering the lives of current and future generations (Collins & Margo, 2003).

The Early Years of African Americans as Educators

Once allowed to be legally educated, some African Americans began to benefit economically by choosing education as a profession. Despite the low expectations set by others, early African American educators believed education to be a means by which to impart not only knowledge, but also "self-esteem and racial pride" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 47) to their African American students. What is more, Scott and Rodriguez (2015) posit that historically some African American educators have acted as firewalls protecting African American students from characterizations that marginalize and devalue their contributions to society. Brown (2012) traces African American teachers' thinking of teaching as an avenue to lessening the educational inequities encountered by African American students, back to the early 1900s.

Having an educator who was an advocate, as well as protector, was especially critical for African American students growing up in the South. In the South and other areas of the country, African American teachers taught in the overwhelming majority of schools attended predominantly by African American students (Ahmad & Boser, 2014).

Therefore, when the idea of integrating all White and all Black schools began to emerge, concerns of potential negative implications were not exclusive within White communities.

While the potential loss of advocacy and protection for their children lay heavy on the minds of African American parents, the prospect of integration and the resulting loss of jobs, which in turn meant a loss of income, weighed on the minds of African American teachers. Much like its economic benefit to White women decades earlier, the teaching profession had begun to provide African American teachers with a reliable source of income by the mid-20th century. According to Dinkins and Thomas (2016), "in 1950 almost half of the African American professionals in the U.S. were teachers" (p. 24). Consequently, ending segregation through the integration of predominantly Black and White schools could "decimate the Black middle class, which depended on jobs in segregated schools" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 91).

Unfortunately, for African American teachers and communities they served, fears of potential repercussions from school integration became a reality. Justices seeking to put an end to unconstitutional separate but equal Jim Crow laws set off a chain reaction, which has reshaped the identity of public education to this day. School districts across the United States slowly began to integrate their schools following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Ahmad & Boser, 2014). As many African Americans had feared, integrating with White schools would cost them their jobs. African American teachers had become "martyrs to integration" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 91) that sociologist Oliver Cox envisioned they would be.

Despite racist policies like separate but equal schooling, African Americans continued to invest in the promises of education, and the number of African American teachers increased to seventy thousand between the early 20th century and 1954 when the Supreme Court rendered its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Milner & Howard, 2004). In just over a decade after the integration of public schools began, close to half of African American teachers lost their jobs. While public education jobs as a whole continued to rise, America's schools purged 38,000 African American teachers from their teaching force (Goldstein, 2015; Milner & Howard, 2004). White parents found it unacceptable to have their children taught by Black teachers, so the flow of integration consisted of Black students bused to White schools. As a result, African American teachers lost their jobs, regardless of their qualifications, and Black schools were closed (Goldstein, 2015).

A full-on assault of African American teachers had begun. Goldstein (2015) described those responsible for the attacks against African American teachers as using "nakedly racist political tactics . . . in the event that they began to compete with Whites for jobs in newly integrated schools" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 91). The tactics carried out by White southerners were successful in having a deleterious effect on the number of African American teachers even to this day. One-third of African American teachers lost their positions immediately following the implementation of *Brown v Board of Education*, even though the African American population continued to grow (Milner & Howard, 2004).

Today, even though half of America's public-school students are students of color, an overwhelming majority of elementary teachers are White women. According to the NCES (2017), in 2014, the percentage of White students enrolled in public schools dropped below 50% for the first time. Nonetheless, the number of White female elementary teachers remained extremely high, making up 71% of the public elementary school teaching force. In comparison, African American males make up less than 1% of public elementary school teachers (NCES, 2017).

Intersectionality of Gender and Race, and the Stereotypes that Affect African American Males

I would venture to say that for most people, the image of White heterosexual feminine women comes to mind when asked to envision an elementary school teacher. Is it possible that we do not see many African American males teaching elementary school students, because we do not see African American males teaching elementary students? What I mean to say is that portrayals of African American males in popular culture are rarely images of kind, nurturing, intellectuals, which are often attributes ascribed to what many believe congruent with the profession of educating elementary age children. Women, particularly White women, are those whom many people envision when asked to describe the characteristics of an elementary teacher.

When I think about how I perceive elementary school teachers, the description of Black heterosexual masculinity does not come to mind. One piece of literature I came across was a book by Gary A. Sailes (1998) titled *African Americans in Sport.* In Chapter 4, one of the book's contributors writes, "In America, Black heterosexual masculinity has been strategically defined and Black men have conveniently had their identities pre-

arranged for them" (Hawkins, 1998a, p. 402). After reading the statement, I began to think about how the pre-arrangement of African American males' identities potentially steers them away from teaching elementary age students.

In the sub-sections that follow, I write about the historical context of negative stereotypes ascribed only to African American males. I begin by describing the origins of some of the negative stereotypes and popular images that continue to stigmatize African American men centuries after their conception. I also cover some of the negative and positive views of positioning African American males in schools as role models and father figures. Then, I discuss how the perpetuation of negative stereotypes concerning African American men contribute to emotional stress associated with the intersectionality of their gender and race. I focus on what ways society's perception of masculinity plays a part in African American males' choosing elementary education as their profession.

Historical Context of Negative Stereotypes Ascribed to African American Males

While Catherine Beecher was constructing an image of White women as "ministers of American morality" whose gratification from teaching was "rooted . . . in the personal satisfaction that came from serving others" (Goldstein, 2015, pp. 22, 32), Black men were being cast as blissfully ignorant buffoons, docile, and full of "juvenile angst" (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 352). During slavery, portrayals of Black men as little more than feeble-minded children, genetically equipped with brute physical strength well suited for only manual labor, were prevalent in American popular culture. In his essays, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner and third president of the United States, wrote that the differences between Whites and Blacks

were “fixed in nature” (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 351) and used unsubstantiated quasi-scientific findings to support his notion that Black people were inferior to White people.

By creating an image of Black people as docile beings, naturally inferior to White people and in need of their firm guidance, Jefferson and others created a narrative in which subjugating Black people with slavery was both rational and acceptable. Jefferson, and others at the time, successfully used print media to cultivate a characterization of Black people as submissive beings, whose only drive was to please their masters. These characterizations of Black people would later carry over into film, as “White actors in blackface” portrayed “Black people as uncivilized . . . unintelligent . . . subservient hired help whose primary desire was to please their White employers” (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014, p. 368).

Although the characterization of Black men as docile buffoons grew in popularity because of its usefulness in justifying slavery, once emancipated, the caricature of Black men as ignorant juveniles began to transform into that of merciless brutes. The election of two African American men, Hiram Revels and Blanche Bruce, to the U.S. Senate did not comport with the narrative of inferior intellect created and reified during slavery. Now free and wanting to create new lives for themselves, African Americans began to grow in economic and political power. During the 12 years of Reconstruction, African American communities began to thrive, which in turn “challenged White supremacy and created White fear of Black mobility” (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 353).

African Americansm no longer in need of caretakers, were now in need of a different persona. The same illegitimate science Thomas Jefferson used to make a case

for the docile nature of Black people was now used to explain how African Americans' natural cruel and "vicious disposition" makes them "more prone to violence and other aggressive behaviors" (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 353). Slavery ended, and therefore, former slave owners no longer found the myth of Black people as docile creatures useful. Former slave owners, desperate to cling to what remained of their power, departed from their pre-emancipation stereotypes, in favor of new negative stereotypes that better fit their narrative of African Americans as sinister beings. The plan of former slaveholders and other Whites of power and privilege to recast negative stereotypes of African Americans aligns with Carney's (2016) suggestion that myths have historical context, can change over time, and sometimes disappear altogether. Carney (2016) explains Roland Barthes' theory of "myths as meta-level signifiers" as being transactional and changing with the times. As the social effects of ending slavery began to extend throughout American society and African American men began to receive an education, own land, and hold positions of authority, the myth of African Americans as meek and ignorant had to adapt to the new reality of bold intelligence. As a result, a new myth of African American men formed into that of the cunning brute.

Once again, African American men fell victim to negative and baseless stereotypes, promulgated with the explicit purpose of subjugation. The effects of the felonious abduction of cultural identity committed against African American men remain to this day. Since our nation's birth, there have been many negative stereotypes created to offer justification for controlling and destroying Black bodies. In the 21st century post-Obama era, negative stereotypes about African American males persist with the same

malicious effectiveness they possessed 3 centuries ago. We have long since abolished slavery and rendered public lynching in our town squares as taboo, yet negative stereotypes about African American men continue to linger.

One of the most prevalent negative stereotypes attributed to African American men is that they are thugs. Thug is the 21st century's version of the 18th and 19th centuries' brute, "Black males who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America" (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 351). Both brute and thug evoke images of physical abnormality that is powerful, yet untamed. They are also a means of collective criminalization of African American males. Hawkins (1998b) cited two famous instances from popular culture where descriptions of assailants pointed to African American males as perpetrators of violent crimes.

The first example provided by Hawkins (1998b) was when a White woman from South Carolina claimed a Black man had stolen her car and kidnapped her two children. Another example referenced by Hawkins (1998b) was a White man who implicated a Black man in a shooting that resulted in the White man's injury, and the murder of his pregnant wife. In both instances, the presumed victims were the actual culprits of the crimes. Hawkins (1998b) speculates that media representations of African American men as thugs and criminals had given the White mother and the White husband the idea to accuse African American men of committing crimes they later confessed to committing.

The term thug is ubiquitous in popular culture, and is synonymous with African American males, regardless of their physique or occupation. Even President Obama has not been able to escape thug euphemisms, as demonstrated by his political rivals

describing him as a "political thug" (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016, p. 351). The purpose of calling African American men thugs is the same as when brute was the preferred term, and that is to conjure fear. Hawkins (1998b) posits that labeling African American males as thugs goes back to the desire to "control the Black body and more specifically the Black male body" (p. 9). Hawkins (1998b) goes on to say that there are two opposing socially constructed dominant images of African American males, "the brute nigger and the sambo" (p. 9). While popular culture characterizes the sambo as docile, childlike, and content, the brute invokes images of aggressiveness, violence, and danger.

Just what is it about African American men that makes them the impetus of others' fear? Irby (2014) suggests that the fear of African American males stems from White people's desire to preserve their hegemony over African American males, by depicting them as a predatory threat to White women. According to Patterson (2001), "Whites feared . . . a world in which Black men might challenge White domination of life," and even worse, that "Blacks might socialize or have sex with White women" (p. 5). Thus, the brute and later the thug became useful and more socially acceptable code words to describe African American males, whose very existence was a threat to the purity of White women, who, in essence, serve as proxies for the purity and goodness of the White way of life.

Who will defend the White way of life from the savagery of the African American male, "controlled by his violent and sexual impulses" (Hawkins, 1998b, pp. 9–10)? Casting African American males as villains in constant need of vanquishing by White male heroes is an unceasing theme in popular culture. Popular culture rarely promotes the

subtleties associated with race and gender. Everything is diametric by design. Being White equates to purity, goodness, and heroics, among other positive connotations. Ask any child who is a fan of fairytales if it is a Black or White knight who comes to save the day, and chances are they will answer that it is the White knight, and that 'he' will be riding a white horse. As Dyer (2008) says, "White racial imagery" casts Whiteness as normal and human, thereby making everyone who is not White abnormal and alien (p. 10).

A quote I read by a former President of the United States reminded me of Dyer's (2008) concept of White racial imagery representing human normality, and non-Whites as abnormal and not human. Irby (2014) talks about a conversation between Chief Justice Earl Warren and President Eisenhower, in which Eisenhower attempted to demonstrate his empathy for White southerners during the debate about desegregating schools, by disparaging African American male students. Irby (2014) quotes President Eisenhower as saying that White Southerners "are not bad people, but are merely concerned to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negro" (p. 785). In order for the students Eisenhower was discussing to be sitting beside each other, they would have to be about the same age, and more than likely would have been similar in size. However, Eisenhower described the White girls as little and the African American boys as big and overgrown.

A couple of thoughts entered my mind about Eisenhower's statement. First, it occurred to me that Eisenhower's concern stemmed from historical depictions of African American males as oversexed brutes. I noticed that Eisenhower was not concerned that

White males would be sitting beside little White girls; his concern was solely about the African American males. Eisenhower, like many other White people during that time, feared that placing White girls in proximity to African American boys made them susceptible to becoming tainted, and thus crippling their ability to "maintain White racial purity" (Irby, 2014, p. 785). Second, Eisenhower's description of White girls as little situated African American male boys' physical stature as an abnormality. By using adjectives such as little to describe White girls, and big and overgrown to describe the African American boys, Eisenhower was trying to emphasize that African American boys' bodies are unnatural, making them liable to harm White girls, who are much smaller and more vulnerable to aggression.

In reviewing scholarly discourse about negative stereotypes associated with African American males, the spectacle and control of their Black bodies is a common and central theme. Television has made the exploitation of negative stereotypes about African American men a lucrative endeavor. The exploitation of positive stereotypes attributed to African American men has also benefited television networks. Initially, images of African Americans on television were rare, yet, as more voices called for equity in media images, there has been an increase in the quantity of African Americans shown on television. The inclusion of more African Americans on television is certainly something to celebrate, as long as the increase is not also an increase in portrayals of negative stereotypes, which often is the case. Dyer (2008) cautions of the unintended negative consequences of opening up "space," such as television programming, "for the voices of the other," even when those voices challenge "the authority of the White West" (p. 11).

Dyer (2008) asserts that a potential negative consequence for including more diversity in media, such as television, is that it may "simultaneously function as a side-show for White people who look on with delight at all the differences that surround them" (p. 12).

I found Dyer's (2008) point particularly salient for sports and reality television programs. In an article exploring how the media covers images of football players, Trujillo (1995) writes that "American football has been called 'a brutal sport' . . . and 'a reflection of our society's capitalist order'" (p. 404). Trujillo (1995) was signaling that, like most other things shown on television, football television programming also reflects what happens in society at large. While Trujillo (1995) posits that "sport, media, and the body intersect in interesting ways," I offer that race should also be included in the mix (p. 404).

The description of football by Trujillo (1995) as a "brutal" sport was not lost on me. Neither is the fact that African American males make up almost 73% of National Football League (NFL) players, but none of its ownership (Garcia, 2018). It is not a stretch to see the similarities between televising NFL games, and what Dyer (2008) was saying about minorities used as entertainment for White people. What is more, I found a commonality among the description of football as a brutal sport, historical portrayals of African American males as brutes, the fact that African American males constitute the overwhelming majority of NFL rosters, and the absence of NFL owners who are African Americans.

Trujillo (1995) writes about the "tendency of broadcasters to label Black players as natural athletes, and White players as hard workers" (p. 408). Here Trujillo (1995)

points out how television broadcasters often revert to stereotypical descriptions of African American males, which accentuate their physical attributes, above their character or intellect. Another example Trujillo (1995) provided of emphasizing the bodies of African American males over their minds was that the majority of plays broadcasters describe as beautiful were plays executed by running backs and wide receivers, which Trujillo (1995) notes are two positions predominantly held by African American males.

Trujillo (1995) also discusses how Monday Night Football, televised in primetime, also reinforces "racial stereotypes of Black men as sexual performers" (p. 417). Trujillo (1995) described a pre-game musical performance as "the most explicit sexual objectification of the body" on Monday Night Football (p. 417). What I found most poignant about Trujillo's (1995) recollection of the African American male football player "swaying his hips and buttocks," was how Trujillo (1995) contrasted that image, to the image of a "White player walking off the field holding hands with his son and daughter" (p. 417).

Consider the implications of both images broadcasted into a million homes simultaneously. One image reifies negative stereotypes of African American males as oversexed, promiscuous brutes, and the other validates White males as hardworking family men. For me, it is undeniable the power that television has to amplify the spread of negative stereotypes about African American males, by its mass distribution capabilities, and by putting a face to the boogeyman.

None of the negative stereotypes about African American males, passed down from generation to generation, evoke the slightest semblance of qualities parents of

elementary students want their children's teachers to possess. It is negative stereotypes about African American men that saturate the popular culture and permeate educational institutions, setting the stage for schools to be "hostile places for many Black males" (Bryan & Browder, 2013, p. 144). If Bryan and Browder (2013) are correct that schools are hostile to Black males, then it should not surprise anyone that once African American males leave K-12 educational systems as students, they do not return in large numbers as teachers.

Yet, much effort toward recruiting African American males to teach in elementary schools continues, even though the negative stereotypes that persist about them in schools pose a threat to their emotional well-being. I fear that without addressing the hostility of which Bryan and Browder (2013) spoke, African American males will continue to forgo elementary education and seek careers more welcoming of their race and gender. I believe it is important to increase the number of research studies that focus on learning from the lived experiences of African American males who brave the negativity associated with their race and gender, so that they may make a difference in the lives of elementary students. Though common themes may consistently reemerge among the studies, I believe the diversity in participants' experiences will result in possible solutions to address the various challenges involved in recruiting and retaining highly qualified African American male elementary teachers.

Gender Racism Stress

African American males are under the constant pressure of public scrutiny because "race and gender are arguably the most visible aspects of people's social

identities" (Schwing et al., 2013, p. 16), and the negative stereotypes associated with the race and gender of African American males are damaging and pervasive. However, despite Schwing et al.'s (2013) assertion that African American men may be more vulnerable than others to racism's physical and psychological effects (p. 16), Johnson-Bailey et al. (2014) posit that "gendered racism is rarely thought of or acknowledged as affecting Black men" (p. 8). Johnson-Bailey et al.'s (2014) claim stems from the privilege they say men would typically possess irrespective of racial categorization. Yet, gender privilege does not seem to extend to African American men whose image draws the ire of people who view them as "pathologically flawed, with strong tendencies toward criminality and violence" (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014, p. 9).

Tyree (2011) and Martin (2008) further Schwing et al.'s (2013) suggestion that the socially constructed perception of African American males as pathologically criminal leave them vulnerable to "emotional distress" (Tyree, 2011, p. 400) from "fear of living up to the stereotypes" (Martin, 2008, p. 340), which can undercut their performance "at work or in academics" (Tyree, 2011, p. 400). The negative stereotypes stemming from race and gender that African American males contend with daily do not stop at the campus edge of schools. There is essentially no relief for African American males from gendered racism, which is the intersectionality of gender and race, as well as the discrimination experienced when the two converge (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014; Schwing et al., 2013). Schwing et al. (2013) found that violence, fatherhood, and athletic abilities to be some of the stereotypes of which gendered racism stress is rooted.

The first gendered racism stress Schwing et al. (2013) discussed is the stereotype about violence. Schwing et al. (2013) note that portrayals of "African American men as criminals and violent brutes date back to slavery," and that imagery is "maintained in the media" to this day (p. 17). Bell-Jordan (2008) says reality television programming often "perpetuate hegemonic representations of race" by portraying African American males as intrinsically angry and violent (p. 357). Many of the reality television episodes I watch often contain scenes of the African American males angrily cursing at one another, fighting, or needing restraint from the show's security guards in order to avoid a physical altercation. All too often, perceptions of African American males as "public menaces who are inclined to violence . . . , incivility and anger" (Brooms & Perry, 2016, p. 168) advance, devoid of many opportunities for them to push back without risk of seemingly confirming the stereotype. This is particularly vexing for African American males who teach elementary students because the negative stereotype of violence attributed to them is in stark contradiction to perceptions of elementary teachers as nurturers.

Next, Schwing et al. (2013) say that the perception of African American males as detached from the emotional and financial responsibilities of fatherhood is a typical view shared by White people. Schwing et al. (2013) go on to say African American males may develop stress because of "a sense of pressure to avoid fulfilling" negative "fatherhood stereotypes" associated with African American fathers (p. 18). Despite the negative view that some people hold about the paternal inclinations of African American males, the belief that there is a need for more African American male role models in elementary education has led to a strong push for school districts across the nation to focus their

recruiting efforts on employing more African American male teachers. L. C. Howard (2012) suggests the prominence of African American male teacher recruitment springs from the belief that African American students need them as role models. In fact, Bryan and Milton-Williams (2017) cite a qualitative study in which African American mothers found African American male kindergarten teachers "to be positive examples of manhood for Black boys" (p. 217).

Additionally, some African American male teachers believe being a role model is a significant part of their jobs as educators and is why they chose education as their career. Scott and Rodriguez (2015) conducted a qualitative inquiry study in which they explored the experiences, motivations, and career aspirations of preservice African American male teachers. One of the three major themes that developed from the study was how being a role model impacted the motivation of African American males to become teachers. Not only did Scott and Rodriguez (2015) find that African American males choose teaching as a career to become role models for others, but they found that their subjects all could quickly point to role models who encouraged them to persist academically, both in and outside of school.

Sometimes African American male teachers find themselves hired in schools as role models, rather than for their pedagogical abilities. In general, an individual considered as a role model would have positive attributes in their character that others believe worthy of emulating. However, negative stereotypes held by some in society about the lack of paternal instinct and responsibility continue to plague African American males, even while they are recruited by schools to serve as exemplary men of color for

primarily African American boys. As such, an unreconciled contradiction exists in schools that espouse African American men as being both the impetus and solution to the trouble with Black boys. Therefore, African American males may feel stressed by the existence of "Black misandry" (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011, p. 66) in elementary schools, even as recruiting efforts seek to place them in more and more elementary classrooms, because they are both African American and male.

Unfortunately, when elementary schools hire African American males without significant regard to both their pedagogical skills and understanding of cultural relevance, they do a disservice to the teacher and their students. Bryan and Milton-Williams (2017) say there is a need for "culturally relevant teachers" (p. 210) who incorporate the cultural knowledge of African Americans into the official curriculum, thereby, supporting the academic achievement and sociopolitical awareness of their African American students. Having African American male elementary teachers be role models to their students is a vitally important part of what it means to be an African American teacher. However, the desire to create fatherly stand-ins should not come at the expense of sound pedagogy. Brown (2012) says that schools that focus on the roles of African American teachers as one-dimensional "run the risk of enclosing and delimiting their pedagogical potential" (p. 312).

Lastly, Schwing et al. (2013) discuss that perceived dominant athletic abilities could be a factor of gendered racism stress experienced by African American men. The perception of African American males as "hypermasculine" (Schwing et al., 2013, p. 18) is the polar opposite to the view that teaching elementary school is a feminine

occupation. As a result, Schwing et al. (2013) warn of "a potential link between racism and vocational choices" (p. 18). Johnson-Bailey et al. (2014) ask, "If normative conceptions of masculinity state that to be a 'real man' is to be tough, financial providers, aggressive, dominant, heterosexual, competitive, and other stereotypical traits, then where do Black men fit into this framework?" (p. 10). I further the discourse by asking how African American males fit into a career like elementary education, when it is not financially lucrative, and overwhelmingly viewed as a feminine occupation.

Closing the gap between the number of White female and African American male elementary teachers seems almost impossible, because of "the lack of upward mobility . . . , perceived feminization" and the view that "teaching has become a less-respected profession" (Medford et al., 2013, p. 15). What is more, African American males are enrolling in teacher preparation programs at low numbers. Dinkins and Thomas (2016) suggest low enrollment of African American males into teaching programs is due in part to the perception of teaching as a feminine profession, especially teachers who teach elementary school. As discussed earlier, schools in general but elementary schools in particular, have increased the number of female teachers consistently over the past 150 years, leading to a perceived "feminisation of primary schools" (Skelton, 2012, p. 6).

Skelton (2012) says that feminisation has three broad understandings: statistically, culturally, or through backlash. A statistical understanding of the feminisation of primary schools is to designate them as feminine because their teachers numerically are predominantly female (Skelton, 2012). Sometimes the culture of elementary schools, where female teachers constitute the overwhelming majority of the staff, produces an

environment in which males may feel they are more likely to be discriminated against (Skelton, 2012). Skelton (2012) advises us that culturally feminized schools can result in discriminatory practices not necessarily limited to male teachers but may also include alienation of male students as well. The third understanding offered by Skelton (2012) is backlash, which she describes as blaming the large number of female teachers for "today's inequalities in education and schooling" (p. 6).

Regardless of one's preferred understanding of the feminisation of elementary schools, social constructs of masculinity and feminism further alienate African American men from careers in elementary education. Even so, school districts may employ initiatives such as "Call Me Mister" and "Black Men to the Blackboard" to recruit African American males to govern "the unruly Black boy in schools" (Bryan & Milton-Williams, 2017, p. 210). In a sense, the perceived dominating physical stature of African American males gives them the desired attribute in today's elementary schools, where troubled Black boys need more taming than nurturing. Brown (2012) describes situating African American male teachers as overseers of disorderly African American boys at school as constructing a "pedagogical kind" (p. 299). Brown (2012) says he derived his definition of pedagogical kind from Ian Hacking's explanation of human kinds. Brown (2012) cites Hacking as defining human kinds as "systematic, general, and accurate knowledge; classifications that could be used to formulate general truths about people; generalizations sufficiently strong that they seem like laws about people" (p. 299).

Some of the historical stereotypes and generalizations about African American males, such as their hypermasculinity, have become attractive to school administrators in

search of a certain pedagogical kind who will be effective in controlling African American boys at school because of their perceived physical preeminence. However, I believe that focusing on utilizing "Black masculinity" (Brown, 2012; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014) as a means to bend African American boys into submission does more to perpetuate the ordinariness of racism in schools and social construction of occupational appropriateness than it does to position African American males in classrooms as examples of academic and life success. Meaning, perhaps recruiting initiatives have an unintended consequence of reducing African American male teachers to classroom management specialists, instead of valued and respected culturally responsive educators.

Although some African American males view teaching at the primary level as a threat to how others view their masculinity, other African American males see primary education as a means to demonstrate just how masculine they are. Brockenbrough (2012) suggests that while some African American male teachers forgo working in primary education for fear of being perceived as less masculine, others try to "secure masculine legitimacy" (p. 358), particularly when teaching elementary students, by mimicking hegemonic ideals of masculinity within the context of primary schools being hyper-feminized. Brockenbrough (2012) describes hegemonic masculinity as heterosexual White males, often positioned as a role model for all students, regardless of gender or race. Even within what Skelton (2012) referred to as feminised elementary schools, whether it be through the number of teachers or school culture, White males still operate from a position of power and set the example of what it means to be male. Whereas many consider White male teachers as role models for all students, recruitment for African

American male teachers as role models is limited to that of father figures, almost exclusively for African American male students.

Summary

My review of the existing literature suggests there are many barriers and considerations African American males must contend with when they decide to pursue elementary education as their career. Many of the challenges African American males face today are derivatives of historically negative stereotypes meant to subjugate and separate them from society through withholding education. From the inception of public schooling in America, it was clear that African American men were not welcome to participate as students or teachers. In fact, White males were the primary attendees and teachers of schools in the early 1800s (Goldstein, 2015; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997). By including only White men, and occasionally White women, public schools had a specific design that allowed racism to not only exist but also flourish as ordinary.

At the end of the 19th century, White women had begun to assert themselves as educators, particularly in primary grades, as White men began exploring more lucrative careers. The exodus of White men from teaching was also a consequence of the American Civil War, which took the lives of many White men of military age, leaving many teaching positions vacant (Hacker, 2011). As a result, America's era of Reconstruction not only witnessed the transformation of Black slaves into American citizens, but it also saw elementary schools once taught almost exclusively by White men become perceived as an appropriate occupation for middle-class White women, who still

make up the largest percentage of teachers in America's elementary schools today (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017).

The champions of transitioning education into a perception of being a feminine occupation were well-known education advocates like Catherine Beecher, Horace Mann, and Charles William (C.W.) Bardeen (Goldstein, 2015; Medford et al., 2013). While Beecher professed an inherent aptitude as her reason for why women are more suitable for teaching than men, she also lifted the economic advantages of hiring women for much lower salaries than men, which was the focus of Mann and Bardeen (Goldstein, 2015; Medford et al., 2013; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997). In the early 20th century, schools were struggling for funding to keep their doors open and employing middle-class college-educated White women became the answer to budget shortfalls. Schools were able to hire White women at a fraction of the salaries paid to White men, which at the time were comparable to salaries of doctors and lawyers (Medford et al., 2013; Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997). Although the interest of White men wanting to pursue more lucrative employment converged with White women's desire to work outside their homes, teaching remained off limits as a profession for African American males because of their race.

Besides gender, African American males must contend with their race as a historical barrier of entry into the profession of elementary education. Prior the emancipation of Black slaves in America, there were laws, which prohibited their education. Williams (1883) said that that education for Black slaves was "the forbidden fruit" (p. 385) that they dared not taste. The masters of Black slaves expected them to learn only what was necessary to complete their assigned duties and saw no need to

educate them further. Despite Black slaves originating from the continent of Africa, which boasted of written and oratory language, established governments, and world-renowned libraries many centuries before the colonization of America, White supremacists created negative stereotypes about Black slaves' intellectual ability to learn as a common means to justify withholding education from them.

In order to maintain the false narrative that Black slaves were somewhere in nature's hierarchy between men and livestock (Du Bois, 2004, 2016), White supremacists devised a plan to use public schools as a way to educate poor White children in hopes of creating a tangible distinction between Black people and White people. Excluding Black slaves from attending public schools became a way to reinforce the idea of White supremacy, by contrasting academic achievement between Black slaves and poor White people (Watson, 2012). Despite attempts by White supremacists to deny Black slaves an education, there were efforts primarily in Northern states to restore human dignity to Black freedmen by teaching them in schools.

Following the emancipation of Black slaves, the number of illiterate African Americans began to fall precipitously as they increased their attendance at school (Collins & Margo, 2003). More than 230 years after the first public school opened in the United States, African Americans finally received the liberty to attend. The freedom to receive public education eventually allowed African Americans to pursue careers in education. In the early 20th century, the overwhelming majority of African American teachers taught in predominantly African American schools (Ahmad & Boser, 2014).

African American teachers served as advocates and protectors for their African American students, especially when teaching in Southern schools (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015).

However, an unintentional negative consequence of putting an end to immoral Jim Crow laws was the extreme loss of employment suffered by African American educators. In 1950, 4 years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, teaching accounted for almost half of all professional occupations that employed African Americans (Dinkins & Thomas, 2016). In the decade following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, integration of African American and White schools resulted in more than half of African American teachers losing their jobs, even though public education jobs as a whole continued to increase (Goldstein, 2015; Milner & Howard, 2004). Milner and Howard (2004) posit that one-third of African American teachers lost their jobs immediately after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. However, White teachers did not lose their jobs to equally qualified African American teachers because White parents were not receptive to having their children taught by African American teachers.

The damaging effect of the convergence of race and gender on the employment of African American male teachers following school integration is evidence of the influence socially constructed negative stereotypes have on isolating them from choosing education as a viable profession. I believe this is especially true when juxtaposing the brutish, hypersexual, deviant stereotypes cast upon African American males, to the perception of elementary teachers as gentle, motherly, nurturing caretakers. Negative stereotypes about

African American males are prominent in popular culture and inextricably connected to what they and others perceive are appropriate roles for them in schools.

There are initiatives geared specifically toward the recruitment of African American males as teachers, such as “Call Me Mister” and “Black Men to the Blackboard” (Bryan & Milton-Williams, 2017). I agree with Villegas and Irvine (2010) that the diversity of our teaching force sends a message to students about the distribution of power in America, which is why I am a proponent for the intentional recruitment of African American males, especially at the elementary level. However, I believe that the intention should focus on the individual teacher’s aptitude and commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy, and not on the perception that African American males have particularly acute exceptionalities to perform as fatherly stand-ins and disciplinarians for at-risk African American boys.

African American males who teach in elementary schools are uniquely susceptible to devaluing of their work as educators. Some people may believe there is a need to hire more African American males to stand as role models for troubled African American boys, including African American mothers. Bryan and Milton-Williams (2017) cited a qualitative study about African American male kindergarten teachers in which African American mothers viewed the teachers as positive examples of men for their African American sons. Some African American male teachers see being a role model as a significant part of their jobs. Scott and Rodriguez (2015) found that some African American men choose to teach for the specific purpose of becoming a role model for their students. The African American males in Scott and Rodriguez’s (2015) study point

to positive role models in their own lives who pushed them to succeed academically, as motivation for them to become role models for others.

Nonetheless, some in society hold negative perceptions about the paternal expertise of African American men, even while schools recruit them as role models. I believe this produces a contradiction in schools where African American male teachers find themselves positioned as both problem and solution for African American boys. There is a constant pressure of scrutiny placed on African American males in elementary schools because their race and gender are highly visible components of their social identities (Schwing et al., 2013). Schwing et al. (2013) assert that negative stereotypes associated with African American men leave them more open than others to the physical and psychological effects of racism. The physical and psychological stress experienced by African American men, precipitated by racism, is "gender racism stress" (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014; Schwing et al., 2013).

In general, males enjoy privilege in society, which normally produces an inequitable distribution of power in their favor (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014). However, being male does not appear to benefit African Americans, who some in society perceive as naturally inept and prone to violence (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014). Furthermore, perceptions of criminal pathology may lead African American male teachers to fear their actions will reify disparaging stereotypes (Martin, 2008), which in turn may cause their work performance to deteriorate (Tyree, 2011). Since gendered racism does not stop at the school door, African American male elementary teachers receive a constant reminder

of the discrimination they experience as being a unique product of their race and gender (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014; Schwing et al., 2013).

Therefore, I believe my study is necessary to add voices of African American male elementary teachers to existing educational research, for which they are not often the focus (Brockenbrough, 2012; Brown, 2009, 2012; Bryan & Browder, 2013; Bryan & Jett, 2018; Bryan & Milton-Williams, 2017; Hicks Tafari, 2015, 2018; Lynn, 2006; Lynn & Jennings, 2009). I learned that historically the establishment of American public schools was to disenfranchise African Americans from education in an attempt to advance the cause of White supremacy. For me, the pathology of African American men choosing to forgo careers as elementary teachers does not rest wholly on their individual choices, because schools share in the phenomenon by historically fostering an environment hostile to their presence. I learned that educational disenfranchisement was particularly unjust to African American males, who are chiefly susceptible to stress caused by the hostility directed at them from schools (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014; Schwing et al., 2013, Smith et al., 2011). However, if you agree that the original intent and design of public schools was to exclude African Americans from the process of learning, then the absence of African American male teachers in elementary classrooms today is not pathological. Instead, you may conclude that gaps in achievement between African American males and their school peers, which may contribute to large teacher-student diversity gaps, is an indication that public schools are accomplishing one of their main objectives. Nevertheless, despite historical roadblocks and negative socially constructed perceptions about African American males teaching in

elementary schools, some continue to enter the classroom each day focused on educating their students.

My study participants represent a few of the disproportionately small percentage of African American males who teach in elementary schools. I am hopeful that together, through their portraits, we will be able to enlighten others to the challenges, as well as opportunities, they face as African American male elementary teachers. I believe using the combination of historicizing knowledge and portraiture research methodology resulted in a study that demonstrates the positivity represented by African American male elementary teachers' commitment to providing their students with a high-quality education in the face of socially constructed adversity. I am encouraged that their lived experiences told through their portraits, may inspire other African American males to consider teaching elementary students, as well as current African American male elementary teachers to continue the fight.

In the next chapter, I discuss using portraiture as my study methodology. In addition, I outline my methods for participant solicitation, data collection and analysis, and limitations of the study. I believe employing a methodology that maximizes my flexibility to record my participants' stories resulted in a study, which fully details experiences that drew and retained African American males in the field of elementary education.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my research was to examine why African American males decide to pursue elementary education as their career and to provide more insight into what teaching at the elementary level means to African American male teachers by exploring their lived experiences. I hope that my subjects' stories will inspire other African American males to consider elementary education as a promising career and help universities and school districts to understand how to recruit, support, and retain African American males in their elementary education programs and schools.

Research Questions

This study primarily sought to answer: Why do African American males decide to pursue elementary education as their career? The study also attempted to determine: What are the lived experiences of African American male elementary school teachers? Through semi-structured interviews, I asked study participants what they believe are the perceptions others have of them and other African American male elementary teachers and what methods they use to create and or maintain positive images of African American men in elementary education. The research study also seeks to understand why African American male teachers view themselves as integral to elementary education.

Specific Methodology

This study not only attempted to unearth the powers that perpetuate low participation of African American males as elementary teachers but also to demonstrate the power some African American men summon from their lived experiences, which fashion their lives as elementary educators in such a way that they are steadfast in their passion and desire to teach. Therefore, I used portraiture as my method of research, because I believe the stories of African American male elementary teachers' lived experiences are important for understanding some of the factors that influence their decisions to become elementary teachers. Equally important for my study to address is the rarity in which research provides African American male elementary teachers with a platform to share their experiences. Silencing the voices of minorities, whether intentional or from a lack of interest, is unjust. I used participants' portraits as a means of amplifying scholarly discourse surrounding the experiences of African American male elementary teachers because as centers for democracy, schools should be the first "to promote empathy and social justice" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, pp. 11–12) among the students and the communities they serve.

African American male elementary teachers are not monolithic, and neither are their life stories. As such, I believe it is important for studies to display their diversity through lived experiences shared via storytelling. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), we use stories to communicate our perceptions of what we experience, which in turn helps us and those we communicate with make sense of what has happened around us. Clandinin (2006) describes the process of narrative research as "listening, observing,

living alongside . . . writing and interpreting texts" (p. 46). Using portraiture as my research method allowed me to codify similarities among the lived experiences of my subjects while at the same time, allowing my data sources to provide information to me in their own voice.

Portraiture was the research method used by Lynn and Jennings (2009) for their study of the uniqueness of how African American teachers teach African American students. Lynn and Jennings (2009) said that the portraiture method of research departs from the "traditional emphasis on pathology," which they described as being "a hallmark" of how African Americans' experiences are researched in the field of education, and gravitates towards "a search for goodness" (p. 181). For me, portraiture is particularly appealing as a research method, because unlike some other qualitative methods, there is an understanding that the researcher's perspectives of the experiences detailed by the study participants are an integral element in designing the study, analyzing the data, and reporting the findings.

Just as an artist uses paint to illustrate his interpretation of what he is observing to an audience, researchers in portraiture use their participants' descriptions of their experiences, along with their own observations, to paint a picture of their perception of their participants' experiences for their readers. Additionally, just as there may be viewers with different interpretations of an artist's artwork, so too, there may be different interpretations of the researcher's findings when using portraiture as a research method. I believe the ability for readers of my study to develop their own meaning in the findings of my study, makes my study accessible and applicable to more readers. Sara Lawrence-

Lightfoot (2005), credited as the creator of portraiture research, said, “If we want to broaden the audience for our work, then we must begin to speak in a language that is understandable, not exclusive and esoteric . . . a language that encourages identification, provokes debate, and invites reflection and action” (p. 9).

Lastly, I believe portraiture offers an opportunity for study participants to view their experiences, which are personal, unique, and well-known to them, as others may see them. Though Hampsten (2015) discusses challenges she sees with portraiture, in the end, she says that portraitures “can animate the lives of participants, illuminating the lessons of their lives in a powerful way” (p. 471). I believe the portraits of my participants speak to diverse audiences and powerfully illuminate my study participants’ life experiences, which others may find useful when developing policies and recruitment strategies to increase the number of qualified African American male elementary teachers.

Although portraits may not often directly result in broad policy or procedure enactment, educational policymakers and practitioners can reference portraiture findings when situations arise that are similar to stories expressed by portrait participants. Bochner and Riggs (2014) say that we collect stories over our lives, which we may later reference in the future when needed. The ability of portraiture research to communicate the ever-present and consequential human element of education through storytelling, in a scientific and methodical manner, makes it an important method of research. For me, the opportunity to arrive at practical solutions, while at the same time valuing the experiences of those individuals willing to share their lives, was a great influence on my decision to use portraiture as my research method.

Study Participants

In order to expose my readers to what it is like to be an African American man dedicated to teaching elementary students, I selected study participants who are (a) African American, (b) male, (c) currently serve as teachers in elementary schools, (d) considered by others to be a highly effective teacher, and (e) plan to return to teach elementary students next school year. Given that less than one percent of elementary teachers are African American males, I thought it might be quite difficult to find in-service participants to be a part of the study. As such, I believed it was important for me to take the time for careful evaluation of my options for study participant recruitment.

Therefore, I began by investigating how other researchers recruited participants for their qualitative studies. Since I have full-time responsibilities other than research, proper management of time and financial resources is essential. Therefore, I needed a strategy that allowed me to recruit enough study participants to provide data sufficient to cover the breadth of emerging themes, while at the same time not undertaking so many participants that I would have been unable to delve deep enough into my participants' individual stories. As a result, I began researching whether there is a minimum number of participants I needed to commandeer for my study, and how I should go about soliciting their participation.

I believe that only African American male elementary teachers, who plan to continue teaching at the elementary level, can adequately answer my research questions, which narrowed my participant demographics considerably. Other than the requirement that they had taught elementary students for one year, and plan to return to teaching

elementary students the subsequent year, I placed no constraints based upon years of service. I did not place constraints on years of service for two reasons. First, from the practical standpoint of limited time and financial resources to complete my study, it is important for me not to squander either. Through my review of the literature, I learned that the number of African American males who teach in elementary schools is minuscule, which had the potential to make it a challenge to find many participants. Therefore, I was open to any African American male elementary teacher who met my basic criteria and who was willing to share their life with the world. Second, I believe that by allowing the range of teaching experience to flow from beginning to seasoned professionals may also reflect a range in life experiences between my participants, thereby producing a counter-narrative to the belief of some that African American males are monolithic. I anticipated my participants' lived experiences would offer both similar and contrasting data points that other researchers may find useful for future studies.

Participant Selection

Using the web application Google Scholar, I searched for research completed using portraiture as the study methodology. I selected five research articles, and two dissertations at random, which had topics related to education or my study, and used portraiture as the study methodology. My intent was not to demonstrate a pattern of participant recruitment for portraiture studies but to gain an understanding of how other researchers recruited participants for portraitures in the past.

What I discovered from the studies I selected was that researchers describe their sampling rationales in varying degrees of detail. Although stylistically different, in my

opinion, both of the dissertations I reviewed clearly detailed their criteria for participant selection. The five research articles' participant selection specificity spanned from discussing the intentionality behind the criteria for selection to offering no rationale for why the participants for their study were selected. What I found common among the dissertations, and the research articles, was that none of them offered a reason for the number of participants. The authors of the dissertations and the research articles indicated how many participants they were using for their portraitures, but none gave a reason for why they chose the number of participants.

Since the methodology for the dissertations and the research articles was portraiture, they all were vying to tell the stories of participants who had characteristics unique for trying to answer their respective research questions. As a result, I believe there was purpose and intentionality behind the selection of study participants, even if some of the researchers did not explicitly point to them in the form of a list. For example, Chapman (2007) indicates that she drew the condensed article I read from a larger study about how "a recent court-ordered desegregation reform" necessitated the use of new curriculum by teachers that incorporated "multicultural texts" to support learning for "a racially diverse group of students" (pp. 157–158). Because the researcher explained that the article was from a larger research document, I inferred that within the larger document, Chapman (2007) said more about the criteria used to select the participant.

Chapman (2007) devoted a subsection of the shorter version of the larger research document to "The Importance of Contexts" (p. 157). In this circumstance, Chapman (2007) was examining the struggle of transitioning a school district from curriculum

dominated by White culture, to a more equitable educational system, and the residual effects appearing in classrooms where the student population is diverse. I gleaned from how Chapman (2007) set the context of the research problem that one possible criteria consideration was for the participant to be a White teacher.

From my review of the sampling methods used by Chapman (2007) and other researchers, I concluded that using purposeful sampling to select my study participants is appropriate for my research. Palinkas et al. (2015) define purposeful sampling as "a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources" (p. 534). Others, such as Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), describe purposeful sampling as the "deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses" (p. 2). Utilizing purposeful sampling to select my study participants, I was able to select participants who met the criteria of being African American males who taught at the elementary level for a minimum of one year, and who intended to return to an elementary classroom as a teacher the subsequent year. Additionally, I was able to identify participants whose life and teaching experiences provided sufficient data for me to create portraits from which my readers could glean a better understanding of what it is like to be an African American male elementary teacher.

Number of Participants

Even though I found a sampling technique that fit my study methodology, I still wanted to be sure about the number of study participants I would need. As I indicated previously, the portraiture studies I randomly selected did not explicitly convey how the

researchers determined the number of participants for their study. Therefore, I read a few articles related to purposeful sampling in qualitative research to learn more about the discourse surrounding sample sizes. I found guidance from Guetterman (2015), who, in his literature review, cited researchers' recommendations for participant sample size depending on the study methodology utilized by the researcher.

Though the terms rigor and sample size are usually associated with quantitative studies, Guetterman (2015) posits that a component of assessing rigor in qualitative research is the ability to demonstrate the sample size of the study is sufficient. Guetterman goes on to say that, "researchers planning qualitative studies need to estimate sample sizes in order to 1. allocate resources and budget, 2. develop proposals for funding, 3. develop proposals for institutional review boards, and 4. conduct rigorous and systematic qualitative research" (p. 2). Though all of Guetterman's (2015) rationales for the thoughtful selection of participant sample size may apply in some form to dissertation research, for me, the allocation of resources and budget, institutional review board proposal development, and conducting rigorous and systematic research are most relevant and essential to the success of my study.

Though none of the researchers mentioned by Guetterman (2015) recommended a number of participants when using portraiture as the study methodology, Guetterman (2015) did cite Creswell (2013) as proposing for narrative inquiry studies, which are similar to portraitures in their communication through storytelling, "one to two cases . . . unless developing a collective story" (p. 4) is appropriate. Nonetheless, my review of the literature regarding sample size recommendations in qualitative research suggests to me

that it is ultimately up to the researcher to determine when he or she has assimilated enough study participants from whom they will need to elicit data to answer their research questions sufficiently. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "the question of how many people to interview, how many sites to visit, or how many documents to read . . . always depends on the questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in progress, and the resources you have to support the study" (p. 101).

As a part of my submission to the university's and school district's Institutional Review Boards (IRB), I stated an initial sample size for my study of three participants. Since I am a novice in utilizing portraiture as a research methodology and at conducting research of this magnitude, I believed three participants would provide me with the diversity in lived experiences, while at the same time not becoming overly burdensome on me as a doctoral student with a family and full-time job. As stated by Sandelowski (1995), "there are no computations or power analyses that can be done in qualitative research to determine a priori a minimum number . . . of sampling units required" (p. 1); rather, researchers must rely on their understanding of the research method used, as well as their experience to guide their decisions for sample size. Still, my focus was on selecting willing individuals, who through my portraits of them, communicate their lived experiences in an "articulate, expressive and reflective manner" (Etikan et al., 2015, p. 2).

Participant Recruitment

All study participants are current elementary teachers in the same school district, which is also the district in which I am currently employed as the chief operations officer. Before I solicited their participation in the study, I completed the district's research

application. The district's research application questions were like questions I completed for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's (UNCG) Institutional Review Board (IRB). I felt prepared to properly complete the district's application because of the work required to submit my IRB application for UNCG.

After a 2-week review period by the district's research review committee, I was notified that my research application was approved with two conditions. First, I was only allowed to email potential participants one time from my non-district email address. Second, the committee wanted to be clear that participation by the district's teachers was voluntary and "not required as a part of the applications approval." I already understood from my course work and the IRB process that participation is voluntary, so the second condition of my research application was not particularly surprising.

However, being limited to one email recruitment attempt did make me somewhat nervous about my ability to produce three study participants. Though I recognized why the district only allows one attempt for participant recruitment using email, which I believe is an attempt to mitigate potential participants' feelings of annoyance by constant communications, I had concerns that my one email may get lost in someone's inbox, or worse, junk mail, and I would not have a way to follow up, especially if email was the only means I had to contact them. Additionally, I was also required to send my recruitment email from a non-district email address, because the district did not want potential participants to feel pressured to join the study as a show of deference to my position in the district.

The district's "one and done" email contact policy made me nervous about whether I would be able to secure the three participants I planned to recruit for the study, but I strongly felt that the relationships I had built over the past 4 months would prove valuable in assisting me in identifying African American male elementary teachers for my study. Rather than sending a random email to the district's teacher listserv, I first reached out to the district's human resource department to determine if they were aware of teachers who met the study's participant criteria of being (a) African American, (b) male, (c) currently serving as teachers in elementary schools, (d) considered by others to be a highly effective teacher, and (e) planning to return to teach elementary students the next school year. In addition to the list of potential participants generated by the district's human resources department, I solicited names from the district's professional development department, because I knew they were responsible for providing training for teachers in the district, and as such, may know African American male elementary teachers who would be interested in participating in the study.

With the help of the district's administrative departments, I was able to identify five African American male elementary teachers, to go along with two teachers I met on my own. Since my initial potential participant pool was greater than the study's planned participant count, and I did not want to tell an African American male that his voice was not needed or worthy of being heard, I contacted each potential participant in the order I received his information and concluded recruitment upon agreement of the third participant. Another option would have been to increase the number of study participants, which I considered. However, I decided the time it will take to properly conduct this

study does not allow me to have more than three participants, while also meeting my family and work obligations. I was able to achieve the desired number of participants after receiving affirmative responses from three of the first four potential participants I emailed.

Data Collection

Participant Interviews

Once I was able to identify the study participants, I forwarded each of them a Consent to Act as a Human Participant document for their signature. In addition to providing general information about the study, the consent document outlined (a) generally why the participant was selected, (b) expectations of them as participants, (c) confidential collection and maintenance of participant data, (d) risks to the participant, (e) compensation for participation, (f) withdrawal from participating in the study, and (g) how the study will benefit society. I brought a hard copy of the consent document to the participants' first interview, which they signed before the beginning of the interview.

I prepared a series of interview questions to prompt conversation surrounding the core research questions I proposed to study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe interviews as a tool for gathering information when a researcher cannot directly observe their participants' reaction to an event, or what a participant felt during a particular moment. Xu and Connelly (2010) say that interviews bring forth the "personal and social matters" experienced by participants (p. 363). By interviewing my participants, I was able to record qualitative data from as far back as they remembered, which in turn shed

light on factors that helped drive their decision to become and remain as elementary teachers.

I interviewed each participant in a semi-structured format. Using a semi-structured interview approach gave me the flexibility needed to ask the same questions of each participant while allowing each participant's response to produce follow-up questions specific to their answers. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) remind interviewers to remain "sensitive and attentive to situational cues" (p. 139), which will allow the interviewer to maximize data collection during the time he or she has with their participant. I feel the ability to follow up on my participants' responses to my initial questions yielded richer narrative data, which in turn provided me with more context and a better understanding of my participants' perceptions of events.

What is more, I structured my questions in a manner that allowed me to analyze participants' responses across participants who may have extremely divergent life experiences. Some questions could be phrased the same, such as "tell me about your experience in elementary school," regardless of the participant. However, other questions were tailored to the individual participant. For example, in order to probe participants' perceptions of how economics may impact African American males' decision to become elementary teachers, I asked my participant who is considered a beginning teacher, without the responsibility of a partner, to describe what living on an elementary teacher's salary is like when they only have themselves to support. For the two participants having more years of service and families depending on them for provisions, I phrased the

question in a way that allowed me to learn how living on an elementary teacher's salary may be different when others are depending on it for financial security.

Similar to the flexibility needed for sample size, I also needed the flexibility to determine the number and duration of interviews. My initial plan was to conduct five one-hour interview sessions with each of my study participants, followed by one 60- to 90-minute debriefing session. During the five one-hour interview sessions with my participants, I planned to explore their perceptions of how their life experiences affected their decision to become and remain elementary teachers, as well as their ideas of how to attract more African American males to the profession. The purpose of the first interview was to establish a rapport with my participants and begin a dialogue about their life experiences. Hicks Tafari (2015) said she used "the grand tour question . . . tell me the story of your life" (p. 95; see also Casey, 1995; Quantz, 1992) to prompt her study participants to open up about their lives.

Though I had questions about specific periods in my participants' lives, I also began my interviews by asking my participants to tell me their story. I planned to have three follow-up interviews to delve deeper into statements that spark my interest, or for which I need clarity. Instead of five one-hour interviews, I had three interview sessions with each participant, ranging in duration from 27 minutes to 2 hours and 23 minutes. I was able to ask each of the study participants all initial interview questions. However, the duration of the interview sessions varied based upon the length of participants' responses, the number of follow-up questions asked, and the availability of participants.

Interview process. One of the most challenging portions of the interview process was scheduling around participants' availability, as well as my own work and family responsibilities. I believe more participants would have made it extremely difficult to complete data collection. Participant interviews typically took place at the school, either before or after school. However, there was one participant whom I interviewed during the school day, during a time when his class was at a special or recess. Another participant I interviewed on a Saturday morning in an alcove of a YMCA before his workout. Still, I am grateful for each participant's willingness to donate their time for the study.

After collecting each participants' signed consent document, I placed the audio-recording device on the table and explained that I would audio record the interview, which would later be transcribed and used to write their portraits. I also explained that I would ask all participants questions from the same questionnaire, and from time to time, may ask follow-up questions unique to their responses. After each participant assured me that he understood what I had described as the structure for the interview, I turned on the audio-recording device and began asking questions from the study questionnaire. A sample of initial questions follows in Figure 1.

PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

The following questions are designed to begin exploration in the lived experiences of study participants. The Principal Investigator (PI) will begin each participant's initial interview session with the statement, "Tell me the story of your life." The questions that follow will be asked if the PI is unable to ascertain their answers from participants' response to the opening interview statement.

Participants' Experiences as PK – 12 Grade Students

1. Describe for me your experience as an elementary school student.
2. How did this experience change as you entered secondary school?
3. Tell me about the teacher(s) that had an impact on you the most.
    a. What was it about (him, her, them) that had the impact?

Participants' Experiences as Higher Education Students

1. Where did you attend college or university?
2. Tell me about your experiences there.
3. How were you treated by your professors?
    a. How did treatment by professors in your major differ from other professors who taught you?

Participants' Experiences as Educators

1. How many years have you taught elementary school?
2. Describe for me the moment you knew elementary education was the career for you.
3. Tell me about your experiences as an elementary teacher.

Figure 1. Initial Interview Questions.

During the interview, I observed the participants as they answered questions, notating on my laptop their gestures and expressions. For my readers to know what my participants were saying is important, but just as important is to know how and under what emotional context my participants uttered the words. This is particularly true when using portraiture as the research methodology, because as Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016) eloquently said, "portraiture . . . is the first social scientific methodology that is explicit in blending art and science, bridging empiricism and aestheticism" (p. 19). I also noted new questions inspired by participant responses. Sometimes the new questions are only

relevant to a particular participant's response, but some can be asked of all the participants, and I wanted to capture them so they could be added to the questionnaire later.

Following each participant's interview, I listened to the audio recording while reviewing my notes to keep details of the interview fresh in my mind. Relistening to participant responses, without the responsibility of conducting an interview, allowed me to formulate my questions in a more thoughtful manner than what I had written in my notes. What is more, I was able to eliminate questions from the questionnaire for which I received substantial responses, while highlighting those to circle back to for additional probing.

Benefits and challenges of participant interviews. For me, interviewing study participants face-to-face worked well for learning about who these men are. First, the sound quality of the face-to-face audio-recorded interviews was very good. Both the interviewer's questions and the participants' responses were clear, which made it easier for me to relisten to what was communicated during the interview and made it easier for transcription. Although I used a transcription service, the ease of transcription related to audio clarity was important to me because of the effect on transcription rates. I was quoted a lower rate for transcription services because of the quality of my audio files.

In-person interviews are also beneficial for portraiture studies because it is important to not only capture what was said but also how it was said (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Portraits allow readers to enter the conversation, see study participants, and hear their voices, not only through the researcher's retelling of dialogue, but also by

describing what they observe. An interview conducted over the phone may allow a researcher to hear the inflection in the participants' voices when they become excited or saddened during a response. Still, I believe it is even more advantageous when an interviewer can pair the sounds of excitement or sorrow with *seeing* how individual participants express them in their unique ways.

Lastly, audio recording in-person interviews provided me with a sense of security, knowing I did not have to dictate every single word during an interview. I knew that if I missed an item of importance in the moment, I could always go back and listen again. During the interviews, I wanted the participant to know I was genuinely interested and paying attention to their stories, which I believe was best demonstrated with engaging eye contact. If at any time I felt I needed additional clarification to questions, or new questions emerged while reviewing the transcripts or audio files, I corresponded with the study participants primarily via text messaging.

As part of coursework in my doctoral program, I transcribed an hour of narrative from two 30-minute interviews. From this exercise, I decided to have my interviews transcribed professionally. While there were costs associated with professional transcription, I believe the gains achieved through timeliness and accuracy, outweighed the cost associated with having the participant interviews transcribed.

Participant Observations

Initially, I planned to observe each of my subjects in their elementary school environments. My purpose for conducting participant observations in addition to participant interviews was to provide readers with a sense of environments in which

African American males must navigate as elementary educators. However, I decided that observing them teach was not a necessary component of understanding why they choose to teach. I believe each participant's answer for why he teaches is clearly answered in their portraits, which is entirely constructed from their interviews.

Data Analysis

As I mentioned during my discussion of my proposed data collection method, I structured my study to identify main themes across my participants' portraits. Both Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Bochner and Riggs (2014) discuss generating themes as a data analysis method for phenomenological and narrative style research methodologies such as portraiture. Researchers who use portraiture and other narrative research methodology derive data used for analysis from their participants' storytelling. Casey (1995) posits, "every narrative is highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion, omission, and disparity" (p. 234). Therefore, researchers who use portraiture as their study methodology must be able to decipher main themes and bridge across participants' stories of their lived experiences, to provide congruency among multiple portraits. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers may analyze data within a participant's story, or across stories from multiple participants. I analyzed data "to arrive at themes that hold across" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 17), or differentiate between the stories of my participants.

I believe it is important to lift common themes as a part of my research, so they might shed light on what may influence African American males to establish their professional careers as elementary teachers. However, before defining the main themes of

the study, I coded my research data from participant interviews. Coding the data collected through participants' stories assisted me in organizing information gleaned from each narrative. As stated by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), coding is a tool for the researcher to use when searching, comparing, and identifying patterns in the data they are collecting.

Once I coded the data, I began organizing the data into common phrases collected across several different sources. During this stage of data analysis, I consolidated my data "into emergent categories for further analysis" (Saldana, 2014, p. 8). From these categories, I was able to identify central themes. Determining the main themes of the study is important to answer research questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the "goal of data analysis is to find answers" (p. 203) to research questions.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Qualitative methodologies such as portraiture rely on their subjects to share very personal aspects of their lives, in order to paint a complete picture of how all study participants' experiences shape their lives. I believe the vulnerability of study participants places an extra burden on the researcher to collect and share their stories with the utmost care and respect. Also, incumbent upon portraiture researchers is to share back with the participant to make sure the participant's story is captured accurately. I believe this can take place even while the interview is being conducted. Even if the researcher is recording the interview, it is a good idea for the researcher to make sure he or she hears what they think they heard. Therefore, interview questions should not only probe, but they should also clarify responses.

It was important for me to perform my responsibilities as a researcher in an ethical manner and to produce a reliable and trustworthy study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define reliability as traditionally being able to replicate research findings. However, this definition would not apply to portraiture because an individual's story is unique. Nonetheless, it is important for the techniques used in data collection and analysis to demonstrate reliability in order to validate the research process more so than the findings it produces. I used respondent validation of portraits, reflexivity, and peer review as strategies for supporting my study's reliability.

Respondent Validation

At first, I planned to provide each participant with their transcripts from their interview sessions. As an alternative, I provided each participant with their portrait and requested they review and affirm that I had accurately reflected their communications to me. Additionally, I asked each participant to respond to their portrait, including their experience as a study participant.

Reflexivity

I am an African American male with two African American male sons currently in elementary school. For 6 years, my oldest son has been in elementary school and has had only one African American male teacher. What is more, until he left, my oldest son's fourth-grade teacher was the only African American male teacher at the school. Now there are no African American male teachers at my sons' elementary school. It was not until the ninth grade that I had my first class taught by an African American male. This study is personal for me, and I recognized that I would need to reflect critically on my

biases and assumptions, and how they may skew my interpretation of the data. Given how personal this study is to me, I initially planned to create a section of the study for me to describe my role as the researcher, so that my readers are aware of how my "assumptions, worldview, biases . . . and relationship to the study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). Instead, I infused my personal thoughts, remembrances, and emotional feelings intermittently throughout each portrait. I believe this approach provides the reader with a direct connection between what participants were saying and my thoughts about how what was being said made me feel in that moment. This was true whether I was reacting to a participant's experience that I had not experienced in my own life, or if it brought back memories for similar events in my own life.

Reporting Data

Chapters IV, V, and VI present portraits of African American males who teach at the elementary school level. Portraits are organized in order of least to greatest years of service as an elementary teacher. I believe organizing the chapters in this manner enables readers to compare and contrast varied perceptions African American males hold about teaching elementary school, in a way that celebrates progressive success in their careers without having to leave the classroom. Pseudonyms are used throughout each portrait to confidentially protect the identity of study participants and the district where they work. In Chapter VII, I discuss the main themes that emerge across the three portraits, as well as study limitations and recommendations for future research.

Study Limitations

I believe the three study participants' personal and professional backgrounds, including years of teaching experience, yielded findings rich with information about why some African American males teach in elementary schools and what school districts can do to recruit them. However, more participants may provide additional information from their experiences that differ or support the main themes emerging from this study's portraits. Furthermore, the study's participants were all from the same county school district, which has elementary schools located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Therefore, the study does not address how African American males who teach elementary experiences would differ if the entire district, for example, was a high poverty urban or rural district.

The study focuses exclusively on current African American male elementary teachers, who plan to continue teaching elementary students for at least another year. It does not ask African American males who are future graduates of teacher education programs why they are choosing to teach elementary students. Also, the study does not include participants who were once elementary teachers but have moved on to other roles in K-12 public education, such as becoming principals or central office staff.

Summary

In this chapter, I focused on the research methodology used to answer the question of why some African American men choose to become elementary teachers. I provided examples of how using portraiture as my study methodology was beneficial in not only capturing my participants' life experiences but also sharing them in a fashion

that magnifies the positivity of the phenomenon over the pathology. Next, I described my sample population and the criteria of being (a) African American, (b) male, (c) currently serve as teachers in elementary schools, and (d) plan to return to teach elementary students next school year as necessary to become a study participant. I covered how I collected and analyzed data, as well as the steps I took to ensure that I conducted my research in an ethical manner. In Chapters IV, V, and VI, I present the portraits of three African American male elementary teachers in ascending order by years of experience.

CHAPTER IV

PORTRAIT OF DABNUS ROBERTS, AKA MR. D

> I had a passion to teach . . . I had a passion for it ever since I had that teacher in high school.

Introduction

Dabnus Roberts, or Mr. D as his students call him, was born in a town populated by less than 30,000 people about 25 miles from Queenstown, North Carolina. Mr. D is the youngest of two boys who cannot help but smile just a bit each time he has the opportunity to talk about his parents. Mr. D describes his upbringing in a two-parent working-class home as fortunate. He says his father would often remind him and his brother growing up that he would provide them with all their needs, but they did not need all their wants. Despite Mr. D's father's proclamations of financial frugality, in reality, Mr. D and his older brother often received much of what they wanted.

Mr. D has taught at Dream Ridge Elementary ever since his days as a student-teacher. Now entering the fourth year of his teaching career, Mr. D is somewhat of a rock star in his district. Mr. D has been his district's rookie teacher of the year, and state PTA teacher of the year. Today, Mr. D greets me in the front office of Dream Ridge Elementary, wearing a blue t-shirt with his school's logo and green khaki pants. After a brief handshake and introduction, we quickly scuttle out of the front office down the hallway toward Mr. D's classroom.

Even though the school day has ended, the school is still alive with activity from students and teachers lingering about the building. While I look around, trying to get a sense of the school's culture from professionally painted murals framed with student artwork affixed to classroom doors and corridor walls, Mr. D continues walking briskly down the one hall in the building that feels deserted. The swift pace of Mr. D's walk gave me a feeling that maybe not enough time had elapsed since students were dismissed, and so his mind and body had not had an opportunity to transition from teaching mode.

When we arrived at Mr. D's classroom, I took an opportunity for a quick look around, before documenting the room setup using my phone as a camera. Dream Ridge was rebuilt in 1999 after the original 1967 facility burned down. Like many of the other elementary schools in the district, Dream Ridge has more students enrolled than it has the capacity, a consequence of population growth and state-mandated class size reductions in kindergarten through third grade.

Mr. D's classroom is what I expected a fourth-grade elementary classroom to look like. In fact, it reminded me of how my classroom looked when I was in fourth grade. There were differences between Dream Ridge and my elementary school that were obvious to me, such as an upgrade to the lighting system with motion sensor LEDs, and a short-throw projector mounted over a dry erase board. I remember my elementary having fluorescent lights, a transparency machine that needed a pull-down screen to project on, and a green chalkboard with erasers that we all clamored for the honor of dusting off on the sidewalk outside of our classroom.

Mr. D and I sat down at the trapezoid-shaped table in the wet area at the back of the room, away from the student desks grouped by twos with chairs placed upside down on them, on carpet visibly worn by years of spills and foot traffic. Until this point, Mr. D and I had exchanged a couple of emails and had only spoken once by phone. After setting up my recording device and laptop, I began the interview by asking Mr. D to tell me the story of his life.

> Growing up, I was very fortunate to have both parents. My dad made sure me and my brother had almost everything we wanted and needed. He also always reminded us, "I'm going to provide you with all your needs, but you don't need all your wants." But we still got all our wants. Elementary school was fun. Middle school was fun. High school, that's when I did found more of myself, found who I was. I had a teacher named Mr. Trapp. He was my first male teacher, first Black male teacher. He taught me math. After I left Mr. Trapp, it was back to all White teachers. My high school was very small, it was like 105 graduating class, probably 15 to 20 Black people. It wasn't a lot of me, but I had a very good time in high school. Then I came to college at Midway University. That's when it was, it was like a culture shock to me. From high school only having those 20 Black people I hung with out of a hundred, to go on where it was thousands. My first degree was family consumer science. I worked at King Energy. It was an amazing company, but I knew I had a passion to teach, that's why I had to go back to school and get a second degree in elementary education. That's what led me to teaching, because I had a passion for it ever since I had that teacher in high school.

K-12 Experience as a Student: "If You Can Remember Your Third-grade Teacher, Fourth-grade Teacher, It Has to Be Something about Them"

Mr. D's experience of not having an African American male teacher until reaching secondary schools is a common phenomenon for many students who attend public schools in the United States. I also did not have an African American male teacher until my ninth-grade geometry class. Still, Mr. D said his passion for teaching drove him to go back to school for a second degree in elementary education. Curious as to whether

Mr. D had events as an elementary student that inspired him to choose elementary education as his career, I asked him to describe his experiences as an elementary student.

> I do still talk to my third-grade teacher and fourth-grade teacher on Facebook because they made an impact, I guess, on my life. If you can remember your third-grade teacher, fourth-grade teacher, it has to be something about them. My third-grade teacher in elementary school, she had a Blue's Clues lunch box and I disliked the Blue's Clues lunch box. I thought it was embarrassing to have to walk beside your teacher in the hallway with this Blue's Clues lunch box, so that's how I remember her. Fourth grade was a hard year for me. That's when I saw that being able to catch your attitude, knew what the attitude was, knew how I could get under my teacher gear. We'll be in the hall, and I would cross my arms, and I will walk slow down the hall. Every time I do that, she gets so upset. It wasn't like, "Go to the office," it was just her keep calling on me like, "Speed up. Speed up. Dabnus, speed up. Speed up." She was nice, and I think she cared. I think when we see people who care for us, we feel like we can test limits because they care so much. They don't want to see no harm done to you. I think that's what made me want to keep pushing because I knew my mom wouldn't get any call. I wouldn't go into the office. My fifth-grade teacher, she was the meanest teacher I ever had. She was a new teacher at my elementary school. She didn't let us talk. She was strict . . . she never let us did anything . . . she'd yell all the time . . .she was mean.

Mr. D told me that his third- through fifth-grade teachers he spoke of were all White women. Indeed, from kindergarten through the fifth grade, Mr. D had always been taught by White women. However, in seventh-grade, Mr. D was introduced to his first African American female teacher, who taught science, and which happens to be one of Mr. D's favorite subjects. Mr. D describes his seventh-grade science teacher as "pretty cool," but says she would often mispronounce his name, which sometimes upset him. Despite his frustration with his seventh-grade science teacher mispronouncing his name, Mr. D credits her with giving him a classroom management strategy that he uses with his students. When Mr. D's students allow other students to distract them during instruction

time, Mr. D will call on the student who is being distracted and use the same line his seventh-grade science teacher used on him, “Don’t let your friends get you in trouble.”

Mr. D’s African American female science teacher was the only teacher of color during his entire time at his middle school. By the time Mr. D began his freshman year of high school, he had the experience of being taught by only one African American female teacher, and still no African American male. But that would no longer hold once Mr. D registered for Mr. Trapp’s math class during his freshman year of high school.

Although transitioning from fifth grade to sixth grade was difficult for Mr. D, the transition from middle to high school was not as challenging. While in elementary school, Mr. D had grown accustomed to the same classmates being in his class year after year, but in middle school, there were new students from other elementary schools that he had to take classes with. By the time Mr. D got to high school, having to take classes with new faces was no longer a negative, but a positive for Mr. D.

> The first school I went to, it was a lot of people, a whole lot of people. I really enjoy meeting new people. I was in band, so we got to go on a lot of band trips. It’s so much that I was open to when I went to high school. In high school, I was student council president, student council vice-president. I would say I was a popular guy.

Someone else popular at Mr. D’s high school was Mr. Trapp. Mr. D said, “I felt like everybody used to go to his room for lunch . . . and in the morning before the bell rang, that’s where everybody would be.” Mr. D went on to say that Mr. Trapp’s classroom “was like a comfort zone for everybody.” Mr. D’s description of how he and his classmates were drawn to Mr. Trapp’s classroom reminded me of a history teacher at

my high school named Mr. Wheatly. Many of us thought Mr. Wheatly dressed cool, and his classroom was also where some of us would hang out. Mr. Wheatly never taught me, but I could tell from his Nike tracksuit and Air Jordan high tops that he was not like the other teachers I had before. Even though my ninth-grade geometry teacher, Mr. Mathis, was an African American male, he was old school to me. I remember Mr. Mathis being funny and coaching varsity basketball, but his classroom was more of a gathering spot for athletes. Conversely, Mr. Wheatly's classroom was not particularly dominated by any one clique, and more of a haven for everyone.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that when I asked Mr. D to tell me about the K-12 teacher who impacted him the most, he said Mr. Trapp. When I asked him to say more about choosing Mr. Trapp, he said,

> He was just cool . . . always energized. He would dress up sometime, but not all the time. He'll wear Adidas sweat suit. "Okay, he's dressing like me." I think he was very welcoming, approachable, and I think that's what made him my favorite, being approachable.

Although Mr. D felt drawn to Mr. Trapp by his energy and approachability, the attraction was not without internal feelings of tension and conflict for Mr. D. For as much as Mr. D enjoyed hanging out in Mr. Trapp's classroom during his free time, having an African American male teacher was uncomfortable for him at first.

> I wasn't used to it . . . when I first had a Black male teacher. It was different. It was a little uncomfortable being managed by a Black male that's not my dad. That's all I'm used to, is my dad telling me what to do, a Black man. I'm not used to the Black man in the classroom telling me I need to focus. I ain't never heard those words, and I guess that's what made it uneasy, when I was only used to listening to one Black male. Now, I'm listening to two.

Mr. D's father was not just any Black male; he was his hero—a dependable provider for his family with exacting expectations for his two sons to make good on the promises of a quality education. According to Mr. D, his family did not talk about him and his brother's school situations often, but his parents made it clear to them both that education was important. This was especially true for Mr. D's father.

For the past 2 years, the day before Mr. D's birthday has marked the unexpected death of his father. I could see Mr. D's adoration for his father as he told me about him. A man who joined the army at 16, and later found his place in the workforce as a truck driver for a construction company.

> My dad was strict, but he let us be boys. We knew the boundaries to test of my dad, he worked very hard to make sure we became the men we are today. He made sure we didn't need to want anything. Every morning before he left for work, once I got in middle school before me and my brother had to go to school, he will come in our room, say, "Have a good day," leave money on the bed, and just leave. And he did that every single day. It was nothing I can remember that we didn't go to school with some money. I don't even know why he did it, but he did it. When I went to high school, I remember for prom, everybody's had limos. The only thing I wanted as a Ford Flex and we knew that Enterprise had one. And I came home, and there was a Flex in the yard before prom. I know my daddy made it happen. I think my dad made it so me and my brother was very fortunate growing up.

Mr. D's mother also did not finish high school; instead, choosing to complete her General Education Diploma and enlist in Job Corps. Mr. D's mother, who continues to live in the small town where he grew up, has also been a source of structure and support throughout his life. I asked Mr. D what his mother thought of him being an elementary school teacher and he replied, "She loves it. She's been here a couple of times. She really

enjoys it. She wants me to be happy. If I'm happy in my career, that's all she cares about."

While their sons' education was important to Mr. D's parents, Mr. D did not feel pressured by either of them to attend college. Mr. D's parents gave him options that sounded eerily similar to choices my own parents laid out before me.

> "You can go or you don't have to go, but you're still going to make something of your life, you're not just going to sit in our house." We could get a job or go to college. I went to college and now I'm here.

Mr. D's father was more precise in describing to his sons their post-high school options.

> My dad told me two options. Go to college or go to the Army. The military wasn't for me. I felt like it was a lot of working out. My dad, he talked about it all the time. He really liked it, but he also didn't like it, if that makes sense.

The thought of joining the Army or being stuck in his small town was more than enough motivation for Mr. D to begin exploring his collegiate opportunities. But no one in Mr. D's immediate family had been to college, besides his older brother, who had a brief stint at a community college. Mr. D did not know where to begin, but one thing he was sure of—college was his ticket out of the small town he grew up in, and once he left, he was never coming back.

> "What will I do? Am I going to go to college? I don't know how this work. I got this FAFSA." The area I'm from, everybody go to PWI. They always had PWI come to the school, so . . . it was like four people who went to HBCUs from my high school. Nobody helped me with FAFSA. I had to be like, "Mama, I need this," "Daddy, I need this." Dad, he was in the Army, that helped out a lot with

> the FAFSA, but I did it all by myself. All my FAFSA, everything, I had to do that by myself because I was the first one to go. They couldn't help me because they never did it.

Experience as a College Student: "The Story I Like to Tell How I Turn a Failure into a Positive, or a Trial into Triumph"

Fortunately for Mr. D, his family's unwavering support was enough to overcome their own lack of experience with the sometimes laboriously tedious process of applying to college. Growing up, Mr. D says he had a lot of White friends, and those White classmates would often attend one of the Predominately White Institutions (PWI), that visited his school to recruit graduating seniors. But Mr. D was not interested in attending a PWI, and instead by happenstance, found himself enamored with a Historically Black College he saw featured on BET College Tours television program. The college chosen by Mr. D was Midway University and is located two and a half hours from his hometown. Mr. D describes his feeling of being in a diverse metropolitan area with a population almost ten times that of his hometown, as a culture shock.

Mr. D says that when he came to Midway, he now had "all this freedom." And though his father pulled away a bit to allow his son to experience his newfound freedom, Mr. D said his father "always reminded me, 'If you're in school, I'm going to be there to help.'" Even though Mr. D was almost three hours away from his father, his father continued to stress the importance of education, reminding his son each time they spoke, saying, "Don't forget the reason you're there."

> That's what he would say every single time. "Don't forget the reason you're there." my first semester, I had a 2.1. He was like, "I'm sending you money, and you come with this." And he was so upset. I never had that problem in high

> school. High school, I was making the B's. I was good. In high school, we didn't really talk about GPA either until we had to apply and I had a 3.3. My guidance counselor was like, "You can get anywhere. You're good." So I was like, "Okay."

When Mr. D first enrolled at Midway University his major was Mathematics. Math had been his favorite subject since elementary school, and coincidentally, the course taught by the only African American male teacher Mr. D had kindergarten through 12th grade. As much as Mr. D loved math, he also had a passion for teaching. In fact, when I asked Mr. D what he wanted to be growing up, he told me a teacher.

> I always said a teacher, and I always wanted to work with people, young adults or kids. I'm very approachable, I'm relatable, so I knew I wanted to do something with people.

As much as Mr. D loved math and teaching, his path toward the classroom was neither straight away, nor without its challenges, especially as it related to his grades. Mr. D soon learned the wisdom of why his father was concerned about his grades in college, finding maintaining a high-grade point average much more complicated at the collegiate level than when he was in high school. Mr. D said, "You can't do a lot of things without a good GPA in college," including receiving financial aid.

> Doing your financial aid yourself, you know how important it is to get some type of aid and scholarships. That's another reason that made me improve my GPA.

Initially, Mr. D was upset with his mother for paying back his loan with the refund check he received from Midway, but now, thinking back on what his student debt could have been, he says he is "glad she did pay that loan back with the refund." Fortunately for Mr.

D, he finally figured out during his sophomore year, with persistent encouragement from his father, what he needed to do to be successful in college.

> In high school . . . I could joke around and stuff, but I was still at 3.5, 3.0 GPAs. In college, once it's low, it's hard to pull it up. But after my dad got on me and kept telling me, "Don't forget why you're there." It slowly rose up.

Eventually, Mr. D shifted his concentration from mathematics as a major to secondary education with a minor in mathematics. Mr. D decided that he would teach middle school, and so, he needed an academic pathway that better positioned him to that end. What Mr. D had not counted on was failing to pass the Praxis, which was a requirement for entrance into Midway University's teacher education program. Mr. D was disappointed but determined to realize his dream of becoming a teacher. So, he, along with a group of about 10 other students also facing dreams deferred, decided to change his major once again to family and consumer science. Mr. D chose family and consumer science because its plan of study was akin to secondary education, and several of the classes he had already completed would transfer. Additionally, Mr. D had devised a plan to reach his goal of becoming a teacher by entering Midway's teacher education program after graduating with a bachelor's degree in family and consumer science.

> I knew once I graduate, I can get in teacher education program with a GPA of 2.5 and a have bachelor's degree without taking the Praxis. Eventually, I still had to take it, but I knew I can at least get in and start taking some of the classes. I figured it out. I was going to get in there one way or another.

Still, what did Mr. D know about the Praxis before he sat for the exam, and why did he think the test was challenging for him and the 10 others who failed the Praxis and

subsequently changed their majors from education to family and consumer science? Mr. D told me that he just understood the Praxis to be an admission exam in Midway's teacher education program. Mr. D went on to say that despite generally being a poor test taker, he did not feel the Praxis was challenging, but he felt unprepared.

> I didn't study. I thought it was just going to be one of the things you walk in, take like that. And then when I got in there, I was like, "Oh." It's like a mini-SAT. But I knew I should have studied a lot, and I didn't take it as seriously as I should have.

I asked Mr. D how Midway University helped prepare him for the Praxis exam and he said Midway offered times for students to come and work with "a specialist in the Praxis" for free. Mr. D did not take advantage of the sessions with the Praxis specialist because they were held on Saturday mornings, which Mr. D stated were not convenient for him. Mr. D acknowledged that it was his responsibility to make an effort to attend practice sessions, but says he found an alternative method to receive the assistance he needed by visiting the specialist during her office hours.

Though not passing the Praxis was a setback for Mr. D, there was another disappointment that he described as the first time he ever felt that he failed at something. If all else failed through traditional methods of entering the field of education, Mr. D had a plan to begin his teaching career via Teach for America. So, Mr. D applied to Teach for America, even making it through to the second round of interviews. However, he was shocked when he was not selected to move forward with his candidacy.

> I knew I could go to Teach for America and be a teacher right at the college. Me and some of my other friends, all of us applied, got to the second round of

> interviews. It was like I got it, I got it, and I didn't get it. That was my first time I felt like I failed at something . . . it was something I wanted to do . . . I had some friends that wasn't even a education major or nowhere near that applied, and got it . . . that was one of the times I felt defeated. I tried my best and didn't get it.

Mr. D describes his failure to become a part of Teach for America as the time he turned a negative to a positive because not being accepted into one program did not deter him from achieving his goal of becoming a teacher.

> It didn't stop me to where I wanted to go. I still pushed forward to being an educator. Now, I'm right here. That's the story I like to tell how I turn a failure into a positive, or a trial into triumph.

Mr. D graduated from Midway University with a bachelor's degree in family and consumer science. Initially, Mr. D intended to use his degree to find a job as a pre-kindergarten teacher or at a daycare. He was applying for positions but was not receiving any responses. Faced with the possibility that he would not be able to support himself after college, Mr. D took a job as a customer service representative with King Energy. Although Mr. D wanted very much to graduate from college and become a teacher, he acknowledges that the salary and benefits offered by King Energy were desirable.

> I started working at King Energy, which is an amazing company. It wasn't a hard job . . . pay well, get benefits. They had great vacation time. I think it was two or three weeks of vacation. They had educational allowance days. When I was in school, if I had a class, I can use that time to go to class. When we was in storm mode, they always have Bojangles, Taco Bell. They fed us well. Everything was good.

As good as everything seemed to Mr. D, working at King Energy as a customer service representative was not his passion. Mr. D knew he still wanted to work with kids,

so he went back to school for elementary education. When Mr. D enrolled once more at Midway University, this time as an elementary education major, he was the only African American male. Still, Mr. D found solace and comradery among the small cohort of 16-17 students in Midway's elementary education program.

> When I went back to get my education degree, I was the only male, only Black male. All the cohorts in school education at MU are very small. It's not a big field people want to get into. So it was around 16, 17 of us, but we really helped each other. Especially if I had a class of someone who was graduating before me, they would give me a lot of good advice, "Make sure you do this. Make sure you do that." We built a strong relationship . . . Especially during our student-teaching, it was like, "Oh, they're going through this. I'm going through this." It was always words of encouragement with that cohort so it worked out well.

Despite the encouragement and words of wisdom Mr. D received from his fellow female classmates in his cohort, Mr. D could not help to wonder what it would be like if he had another African American male in his cohort. Although Mr. D did not have another male classmate in his cohort to bond with, he did have professors "great professors" who advised him along the way. Mr. D says his professors kept him motivated and saw more in him than he saw in himself. Mr. D spoke about how his professors pushed him while he was a student and how one serves as a mentor to him today. Mr. D is grateful for the relationships he has built with his college professors, which came in handy while planning this year's math fair. Even though his professor turned mentor was not able to attend the fair as a participant, he was able to direct Mr. D to another professor in the department who was able to help him.

> You never know when you're going to need them. I took it upon myself to have that mentor and to stay in communication with him to build that relationship. So

> building that communication, that relationship with all professors was good for me.

Previously, Mr. D had indicated that he was not successful with passing the Praxis as an undergraduate, due largely to his own failure in taking advantage of the assistance offered by his university. Mr. D almost made the same mistake again when he first returned to Midway University to pursue a degree in elementary education. Mr. D told me that he was not taking school seriously when he first returned. Mr. D said that some of the classes in Midway's education curriculum "are bird classes" you "just fly right through them." But when it came time for him to begin his student teaching, once again he found himself unprepared.

When it came time for Mr. D to begin his student teaching, he had not identified a school or completed the requisite paperwork. Luckily, Mr. D had a friend whose sorority sister worked at an elementary school, and she was willing to serve as Mr. D's cooperating teacher. Mr. D had the opportunity to practice teaching at the middle and high school levels, as well as the elementary level as a part of his field experience. However, Mr. D began his field experience in an elementary school and credits his time in that school as the moment he knew he "wanted to be an educator in elementary school."

I asked Mr. D to describe Midway University's teacher preparation program, and the support they provided him during the time he was a student-teacher.

> I would describe it as being accountable. I say accountable because they tell you what you need and they're there to help you succeed. But you also got to hold yourself accountable to get to where you want to go. If you don't hold yourself

> accountable, they can only do so much. But they do have it in place for you to succeed. But you have to want to succeed just as bad to be successful. They did a great job. They make sure you have a cooperating teacher, you have a mentor which is your teacher that comes to the school like every two to three weeks. My cooperating teacher went to Midway, so she was a little adjusted to how it's going to work and she had a professor also. They was comfortable with each other, so that transition, it was good. You're getting observed because when your professor come, you need to know what you're doing. They're coming in, making sure you're on pace to be done by graduation.

Mr. D was very complimentary of his cooperating teacher, who currently teaches in the classroom next door. Mr. D says that his cooperating teacher pushed him during his time as a student teacher, and credits her with making him the strong teacher he is today. It was not just Mr. D's cooperating teacher that helped him along the way; he says the other teachers at the school accepted him, and he "never felt unwelcome" while student teaching at Dream Ridge Elementary.

> During my student-teaching, I taught in fourth grade. I got to go to the grade-level meetings. If I ever had questions during my student-teaching, I was able to go into other classrooms and see how their classroom looked, how it was ran. It was a very good student-teaching experience.

When I asked Mr. D what he learned during his student teaching experience that benefits him now as a teacher, he replied, "persistence."

> I'm very driven, and I think that's something your inner self have to have to keep that drive. Keep going and going. As a teacher, every day, you got to keep going. Even if you feel burned out, you got to be persistent, and keep going, and keep going. I would say I really learned persistence and how to get there. Last year, I didn't miss a day until February for my mom's birthday. I don't like missing days. I think the persistence of showing up makes the students persistent to show up. The journey of an educator is hard. It's hard but it's rewarding at the end of the day.

For Mr. D, persistence was just as critical as his passion for educating young people for driving towards his goal of becoming an elementary teacher. Previously, Mr. D had shared that he worked for King Energy while enrolled at Midway University pursuing a second degree in elementary education. During his time with King, his ability to persist in completing his elementary education degree and becoming an elementary teacher would be tested on occasion. Mr. D explained what it was like working in storm mode at King, while at the same time student teaching at Dream Ridge Elementary, and important lessons he learned from the experience and his cooperating teacher.

> Storm mode is when a storm, like a hurricane, anything happens in North Carolina, South Carolina, or Florida. In a storm, we had to start working 12-hour days. When I was in school getting my second degree, I was a student-teacher here with my coordinator teacher right beside me, and my storm schedule was 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. I wouldn't get here until 8:30. I was drained because I still had to work my storm schedule Saturday and Sunday, and then back on at Monday working 7:00 to 7:00, here 8:00 to 3:00, go home, sleep for two hours and back at it. That was probably one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, was working 12 hours there and then come here. I'm glad I had that experience with my coordinating teacher. She told me that, "You're going to have days like this where you may want to hang out with your friends, but you have these kids that are depending on you to come every day. And you can't make no excuse like 'I'm tired.'" So I'm glad she instilled that in me. Just because you are working that job, you want to be a teacher, you want this career, she didn't slack off on me. I like to say the saying, "You don't want to be the smartest person in your circle." And that's why I always keep people around me who are continuously growing.

I could tell from my discussion with Mr. D that he thought highly of his student teaching experiences, which include the school where he taught and the support he received from Midway University. Still, I asked Mr. D what could have been done to improve his student teaching experience.

> I think being able to student-teach in a lower grade and a higher grade. I think that would have been an amazing opportunity to have that background knowledge. "Okay, this is how a kindergarten to second-grade class works. This is how a 3 to 5 classroom work." I think that would be my only change, would be able to go do K-2 and then 3-5, or 3-5 and K-2 to see the difference.

Mr. D the Teacher: "He Was as Strict as Baby Bear's Porridge: Just Right"

The last two times I interviewed Mr. D were later in the afternoon than the first. When I arrived at Dream Ridge Elementary for our second interview session, parents were lined up in their cars picking up students from an after-school program being held at the school. One of the teachers recognized me from my earlier visit with Mr. D and told me I could find Mr. D in the gym. This time I walked down the halls of Dream Ridge at my own pace by myself. The halls were quieter this time, and empty besides the occasional student or faculty member scampering towards an exit.

Dream Ridge is not a large school, but I was not familiar with its layout. Instead of continuing to meander down each corridor at random, I decided to ask a student to point me towards the gym. Just my luck, the student was headed towards the gym and offered to guide me there as well. Upon arriving at the gym, I found out that the student and I were both on our way to the gym to see Mr. D.

There were about ten or twelve male students dribbling basketballs and shooting baskets throughout the gym. Mr. D briefly took a moment to greet me by shaking hands before he returned his attention to the students. Mr. D told me that he would be finishing with the students in about 5 minutes and asked the young man whom I followed to the gym to escort me to Mr. D's classroom. I told Mr. D no problem, and once again set off with my designated tour guide down the halls of Dream Ridge elementary.

As we walked to Mr. D's classroom, I asked my escort, an African American male, his name and what grade he was in. He told me his name and that he was in the fifth grade. I then asked him what was going on in the gym with the boys playing basketball? The young man told me that he and the other boys were participating in a program called Power Up. When we arrived at Mr. D's classroom, the student picked up his book bag and coat, gave me a handshake, and told me it was nice to meet me before he left.

I set up my laptop and recording device as I waited for Mr. D in his classroom. As I sat anticipating Mr. D's arrival, I wondered to myself what is Power Up and what is Mr. D's involvement? I concluded that Mr. D had some responsibility for Power Up since he had told me the reason we were meeting later in the afternoon was because of an obligation he had, and because he was wearing sneakers, shorts, and a t-shirt this time when I saw him in the gym.

Mr. D finally arrived at his classrooms, and after once again extending pleasantries, we began our interview session. Still curious about what I had just witnessed in the gym, I asked Mr. D about Power up, and how he was involved.

> When I first started teaching, when I student taught, Ms. Thomas, she started a group called Glow Girls. At that time, everybody was saying the "glow ups." It was like the girls, grades three to five. They cheered, danced, whatever. So, when I started teaching my first semester, I was like, "The boys need something." I wrote the proposal, what it entails, like promoting leadership, cooperation, teamwork, team spirit . . . academics . . . they need to read 80 minutes to participate in basketball for 30 minutes. The first 30 minutes of 45 minutes of Power Up they eat snack and do study hall in here. That's the time for them to talk to each other, getting their work done.

One of the ways Mr. D teaches Power Up participants leadership is through making some of the boys head of grade-level teams. Mr. D says that not only does it teach the grade-level heads to be leaders, but that it teaches all the boys to be accountable to one another. Mr. D explained that Power Up members are responsible for monitoring and encouraging each other to achieve academically and to demonstrate positive behavior while in school and at home.

> It's like a little brotherhood. They're really responsible for each other, and they're real honest about what happened, and when it happens, they're going to take accountability for it.

Recently, the fifth-grade Power Up members took their math curriculum-based assessments, and Mr. D reports that almost all of them made 80 or higher. Mr. D says that they came to him, excitedly saying, "you won't believe what I made." Though Mr. D congratulated and celebrated their accomplishment, he reminded them that they could do better and continue to grow academically.

> "That's good but I know we can do better." "I'm proud of you but do you want to stay right there or you want to grow in fifth grade?" They had to write a summary of how they will grow. Once they was done, they shared with Power Up how they're going to grow for the next test.

Power up is just as much about fellowship and providing members with opportunities for experiences they may not otherwise encounter without the program.

> I got a guy from King . . . MU that come over, and they give them basketball drills. We get jerseys this year. We got a chance to go to the King game last year. This year, we're going back. He emailed me today and said, "Do you all want to have a little game during halftime of the girl's game?" And I said, "Of course." I

> really like taking them outside school because some of those boys never had a chance to go to a college basketball game, probably never will. For them to see that, that's like, okay. This is nice. I like this court. I'm seeing all these people. I want to do this.

As I soon learned, Mr. D's strategy of combining mentorship and sports was derived from his own experience as an elementary student. When Mr. D was in fourth grade, he had a mentor named Jesse Black, who played a sport for Westridge University and would visit him at school every Thursday. Mr. D says that he still tries to locate Jesse on Facebook but has been unable to find him. Mr. D credits Jesse for having a positive impact on his life and inspiring him to do the same for his students. In fact, Mr. D's experience with a mentor when he was in fourth grade, is one of the reasons he asks people from the community to come and mentor his third through fifth-grade students who participate in Power Up.

> I do ask a lot of people from the community come in. Last year, they learned how to tie ties. I like when I can have those outside resources come inside. Some of them stay in contact with some of the boys like a mentor. I always tell them before they come in, "I'm inviting you here because you might make an impact on them that I can't."

Mr. D is hopeful that Power Up will continue at Dream Ridge Elementary for as long as possible. Mr. D believes Power Up is "a good program and it's for all boys, Black, White, Latino." He says the 26 third- through fifth-grade boys look forward to attending Power Up every Wednesday after school. Mr. D concedes that some of the boys do not like the study hall portion of Power Up, but eventually they settle into it as an important part of the program.

The mentor from King keeps academics at the center of his discussions with the boys who participate in Power Up, and often reminds them, “If you want to go to King, you got to work hard to get in there.” Mr. D says he is appreciative of mentors like the one from King, who is also an African American male, and reifies the importance of academics to his students. Mr. D views the mentor from King’s participation with Power Up as “amazing,” especially since he continues to serve even though his nephew has graduated from Dream Ridge and is no longer in the program.

Teachers at Dream Ridge who have Power Up members in their classes are grateful for the program and have told Mr. D that “they love Power Up.” Mr. D told me that the teachers who have members of Power Up in their classes, “know I’m going to reinforce things.” Not only is there accountability among the Power Up members, but Mr. D is held accountable for members’ actions by other teachers at Dream Ridge.

> Teachers tell me when these boys get in trouble, I have to let them know that you’re a reflection of Mr. D. A lot of things reflect back to me, how my boy’s act.

Mr. D has taught at Dream Ridge Elementary ever since he was a student-teacher while completing his elementary education degree at Midway University. Juxtaposing his past employment as a customer service representative for King Energy versus now as a fourth-grade teacher at Dream Ridge Elementary, Mr. D says, “I’m much happier now doing something that I enjoy and impacting the lives of tomorrow. I think a bigger impact is working at the elementary school level. That’s what really brought me here.”

I asked Mr. D to describe the teaching staff at Dream Ridge and he sees it as “diverse.” Mr. D says that he heard Dream Ridge was majority White 15-20 years ago,

but now he believes it is approximately 65%-75% Black, which he loves "seeing in the school" since it is more of a reflection of the students Dream Ridge serves.

> When people say, "How would you describe your school?" I say . . . It's everything in here. It's more White teachers here, but I think the African-American teacher population is growing here also. This whole hall this year is Black teachers, and I think that's different for people when they walk down the hall, to know every classroom is a Black person, a Black teacher teaching on this hall.

Mr. D asked if he could have a moment to find a picture he wanted to show me. I assured him that I was more than happy to wait, and so, I sat there while he searched on this laptop for the picture. In just a few seconds, Mr. D was able to locate the picture he was looking for and turned his laptop around so that I could see the picture on the screen. It was a picture of Mr. D's fourth-grade class posted on Facebook by his fourth-grade teacher, whom he keeps in contact with to this day. The picture not only provided a visual aid for understanding the demographics of Mr. D's classmates in 2000, but also drew a sharp contrast between the demographical makeup of students in his small predominantly White rural town in the early 2000s, to the urban majority-minority school district Mr. D teaches in today.

In the picture, you see Mr. D, one other African American male, three African American females, six White females, five White males, one Latino male, and two Latino female students. Conversely, the fourth-grade class Mr. D teaches is made up of five African American males, three African American females, six Latino females, three Latino males, and two White females. Mr. D explained that he had been with the same

group of classmates since he was in second grade and continued to loop with them through the fifth grade.

For Mr. D, looping did not mean the same students and teachers move from grade to grade together, as he has done himself as a teacher. Instead, Mr. D moved from second to fifth grade with the same classmates but had a different teacher each year. Mr. D explained that not having classmates who looked like him was not out of the ordinary since he grew up in a predominantly White town and attended predominantly White primary and secondary schools throughout his childhood. However, as an elementary educator, Mr. D views his experience as one of two African American males in his fourth-grade elementary classroom differently.

> Looking at this picture, who can I work with? I see all these White boys, they can get in groups of three and four, but it's just me and him. Then I had this White teacher, how can she connect with just me and him? She can relate to everybody else in the classroom, probably.

The fourth-grade class Mr. D teaches is mostly African American and Latino, differing from the predominantly White fourth-grade classroom for which he was a student. Today, Mr. D believes his race and gender are advantageous for connecting with his African American male students in the majority-minority school and district where he teaches. While White teachers can empathize and practice culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms, there is no substitute for having lived through elementary school as an African American male.

Mr. D does not assert his race and gender alone affords him an automatic connection with his African American male students, but he does consider how others

may view them through the same deficit lens he was seen through when he was their age. As Mr. D describes his love and devotion to his African American male students, you can almost see him in the hall outside his doorway, greeting students with a big smile and high-fives as they walk by, but sometimes correcting them with stern words when they wander down mischievous paths, as children their age often do.

> With my classroom, I think it's a big difference. I love seeing my Black boys learn, excel in my classroom. I tell them, "You're a Black male." I think it's important to let them know now, "You're a Black male in here." I wish somebody would have told me in fourth-grade when I was having this attitude in the hallway, "You're a Black male. This is not a good thing. This is not going to work in the real world."

Mr. D did not have an African American male teacher in elementary school like his students have in him, but he still remembers his African American male math teacher when he was a freshman in high school. Mr. D says he remembers him because "he showed me he cared." For Mr. D, there was a feeling of security and trust that developed as a product of his African American male teacher's demonstration of caring for his wellbeing. Building trust in young people drew Mr. D to elementary education, saying, "trust is something very important to me, to have trust in someone I believe in . . . having younger kids put that trust in me really made me want to be in the elementary school setting."

When Mr. D first started teaching at Dream Ridge Elementary, he taught third grade. Mr. D recollects how challenging his first year as a teacher was compared to his experience as a student-teacher. As the full-time teacher, Mr. D had to communicate directly with parents, something he did not have to contend with as a student-teacher. Mr.

D's transition from student-teacher to a full-time teacher was particularly challenging because he made the change in the middle of his students' school year.

> When I had to start talking to parents, parents are—sometimes, they're difficult to work with, and I understand because that's their child. They want the best for their child. I think sometime when you transition to a classroom middle of the year, and you're new, and you're a male, and you're a Black teacher, I think parents are harder on you. I think they trust a White teacher more with their child because that's what they're accustomed to seeing. When they see this change and this difference, it's like, "I need to question him." Like, "How do you feel about this? Why are you doing this?"

Some of the parents' trepidations could have stemmed from reasons other than race or gender. As a parent, I could empathize with the concerns Mr. D's parents had with having a beginning teacher who started midway through the school year teaching their child. I might have asked Mr. D the same questions if I was in their position. Mr. D himself acknowledges beginning a teaching career in the middle of the school year is ideal timing. Still, Mr. D touched on a feeling of otherness that many African American male elementary teachers have experienced at some time or another during their careers.

Despite the diversity among students and faculty, like most elementary schools throughout the United States, the majority of teachers at Dream Ridge Elementary are women. Historically, women have been viewed as the quintessential educators of young children because of a perceived innate ability to nurture. Even Mr. D, an African American male teaching at an elementary school, believes nurturing is instinctive for women. In fact, he considers if he would be as good of an elementary teacher today if he had a male cooperating teacher instead of a female.

> Women are more nurturing than a man, and I think if I had a man teacher, I wouldn't know how to nourish—not as much as a woman. I think that comes natural for a woman to nurture all the kids.

Mr. D says that the other teachers describe his classroom as "such a male classroom," and that sometimes they decorate his room with color. According to Mr. D, if it were left up to him, his classroom would be black and white. Mr. D went on to say that he is thankful for his cooperating teacher cultivating his "nurturing side," which he attests has grown over the past year. Given that Mr. D once desired to teach math at the secondary level but later found his true passion was teaching elementary-aged students, I asked Mr. D how important learning to nurture would have been if he had decided to pursue a career as a middle or high school teacher.

> I think it's important. I think it's very important anywhere. I go inside of the classroom to build a nurturing classroom environment. In my class, I say classroom community. so many things can be happening at home . . . You're more than a teacher. You're a brother, a dad, a mom.

Just a few nights earlier, Mr. D said he had attended a barbershop talk where the panelists were African American mothers of students in his school district. Mr. D recalled one of the mothers saying, "My son had a Black teacher. That's all he talked about." Even though Mr. D had a rough start his first year as a teacher, the following year he was the Black teacher that students and their parents were talking about. The same parents who were constantly questioning him when their children were in third grade had changed their outlook on Mr. D by the end of their fourth-grade year.

> The following year, fourth grade, it's like their perspective changed. In that whole year of fourth, I felt like it was smooth. The parents knew me. The students knew me. If I see them in public and they're chattering up to me and like, "Hey, Mr. D." or "I miss you." It was a great, great year.

When Mr. D first began teaching at Dream Ridge Elementary, there was another African American male on his third-grade team. Mr. D would observe him from afar, adopting many of his pedagogical practices as his own.

> He probably didn't know I was looking at him like, "I want to be like him" or that's like an unofficial mentor. But seeing him in the classroom, I took a lot of his skills. I looked at him at a distance like, "Okay, all these kids look at him so much different than they do everyone else."

Even though Mr. D thinks highly of his female cooperating teacher and is thankful for the guidance she provided when he was a student-teacher and still provides today as a colleague, he did take a moment to ponder if he would be better, worse, or the same as an elementary teacher had his cooperating teacher had been an African American male. The benefits of having an African American male on his team as a beginning teacher were obvious to Mr. D, so I asked him how he believes his student teaching experience would have been different if his cooperating teacher were an African American male.

> I think a male, it would have been different. It would've been a little more firmer. I think the outcome still would have been amazing. I think I just would've learned how the kids see a man inside the classroom, and I think that's important for a lot of people to see: the difference between kids in a male classroom and kids in a female classroom.

I asked Mr. D to say more about why he feels it is important for people to see students in a male classroom. What is more, why is it important for all students to have at least one African American male teacher while they are in elementary school?

> [It] shows that teaching is a job for everybody, not only White male teachers or White female teachers. It's something that we all can do. If you don't see a Black male, you don't think Black males can be in that field of education . . . I think that's why it's important to see them in elementary school.

Mr. D considers himself an "equity champion" and uses his positionality as a teacher to speak directly to the African American male students of Dream Ridge Elementary. When Mr. D first began teaching at Dream Ridge, he was hesitant about intentionally focusing his attention on African American male students. Mr. D was concerned about how African American parents would view his words and actions. Now, Mr. D says his love for African American male students and his desire for them to succeed in life outweighs previous fears of being misunderstood by parents, even when assuming the role of disciplinarian.

> I have figured out it's okay if I'm talking to one of my Black boys to say, "You need to get together. "We're both Black. I'm a Black boy. You're a Black boy. I want you to succeed." I didn't know how the parents was going to take it from me telling a Black student, "You're a Black boy like me." Now I know when I do say something like that, "You're a Black boy. I'm a Black male. I'm telling you this because I want you to succeed." My Black males, I really love them . . . "I love you so much, and I see all this potential in you that you don't see yourself."

Mr. D says he can see them because he is one of them. Mr. D feels attached to his African American male students and hopes that one day they will understand that what he does for them is done out of love, even if they do not realize it now.

Besides modeling success for African American male students, Mr. D believes African American male elementary teachers demonstrate the importance of diversity for all students and their parents early in their public education experience.

> It teaches students acceptance and diversity. I think one of the most important things we can teach students other than having a growth mindset is acceptance. I think that goes way beyond students in the classroom. I think that goes to parents. If your child had a White female teacher from K-4, and in fifth grade it's a Black teacher, not only do the students got to accept that this is something different, they got to accept the diversity that's about to happen now, that this is a Black teacher, male teacher. But the parents have to accept it, too. And I think that's something we all can teach students about seeing a Black male in the classroom. Once you accept it, that's when you can start building that trust.

Mr. D attributes the lack of acceptance of African American male elementary teachers to them being "almost extinct in the elementary school." However, Mr. D says that he has found African American mothers to be quicker to accept him as their child's teacher than White parents. On occasion, African American mothers have requested their children to be placed in Mr. D's classroom. Mr. D told me that a teacher at his school, forgetting that he was a fourth-grade teacher, asked if there was any room in his class for her child who was in third-grade.

> But that was also a Black woman. I got that a few times. "I want my students to be in your class next year." But it's never a White person. It's always Black.

Why are the African American mothers requesting their children be assigned to Mr. D's classroom? Mr. D thinks that maybe African American mothers have an "implicit bias," which suggests "he knows my culture." He thinks the mothers may

believe, “They want someone like [their child] in the classroom . . . They don’t know they’re thinking it, but it’s like, ‘He know the culture. He can relate more.’”

Although some African American mothers may feel that Mr. D can relate to their children because of his race, he says, “that’s not always true.” Mr. D concedes that not all African Americans’ life experiences are the same. He says, “even though I’m a Black male, it’s not like I can relate to every person who walks in”; for example, “it’s hard for me to relate to a single parent mom or dad when I had both parents.” Still, Mr. D is hopeful that parents will allow him to nurture and care for their children because of his pedagogical skills, not because of his race and gender.

Nonetheless, Mr. D is not naïve to the role his race and gender plays into the perceptions of whether parents deem him appropriate for teaching their children. Mr. D feels that if he was a White teacher, parents would be saying, “I want to be in there, because that’s what they’re used to.” Mr. D empathizes with parents who are not used to seeing African American males teaching in elementary classrooms. Mr. D says that he “wasn’t used to it” and felt “a little uncomfortable” under the supervision of an African American male who was not his father.

I was curious as to why Mr. D was fine with White women having authority over him at school, but uncomfortable when his teacher was an African American male?

> I guess that’s what I was used to. That’s what I was used to from K-8. I know when I go in this classroom, it’s going to be a White woman, and I need to listen to her. If I don’t listen, she’s going to call my mama and mama’s going to be upset.

As a student, Mr. D says he was afraid when the teacher was a White woman because he felt like as soon as he made a misstep, he would be sent to the office, and his mother would be called. So, for Mr. D, the only options he believed he had for his first 9 years of school was, "I'm going to deal with his authority or get in trouble at home." However, Mr. D was not as sure about the consequences, once he had his first African American male teacher.

> Having a Black male, it was like, I don't know what's about to happen. You're telling me to do something. I don't know what to do. I don't know how you're going to handle things in here. I was used . . . a woman having authority . . . I knew the consequences about getting in trouble in a White female classroom.

Mr. D does not recall strategies he and his fellow teachers use, like restorative practice or sending students to another classroom for a while, being used when he was in elementary school.

> I love when they say, "Can I go to Mr. D class?" I love having the opportunity to see someone upset, and then we are talking here by ourselves and see them eventually go from a 10 to a 1.

Instead, he and his classmates were sent to the office, which he says that as a teacher, he never considers an acceptable option. Mr. D says that when students are sent to the office, they are missing instruction, and instructional time is too important to their academic success to be spent sitting in the office.

So, what is it that Mr. D is doing in his classroom as a teacher that his White female teachers were not doing when he was an elementary student? I asked Mr. D how he would describe his classroom management style.

> I think I have a great classroom management style. I think students know what I expect out of them, what to do when they enter my classroom. I think my classroom management style is . . . orderly. It's manageable. I don't make expectations that I know are not reachable, and I tell my students that. Everything I say, I know everyone is capable of doing. I know it's not impossible.

During the first couple of weeks of the school year, Mr. D is helping his students understand that he is there for them. Mr. D says that he does not baby them, but he nurtures and cares for them. Mr. D told me that he takes the time to get to know each of his students because building a relationship with them is the foundation for a good year. Part of Mr. D's plan to build relationships with his students is "keeping constant communication" with his parents.

> That's something I have learned over the year... keeping parents in the loop not only with negatives but positives also. It's like a customer service job. You want to make them happy. You got to know what to say so they don't pop off. Being a teacher, we can't snap back.

Mr. D said that sometimes it is hard to maintain constant communication during the school day with his parents because he has so many students. Yet, Mr. D knows good communication is necessary for him to express to parents how much he cares about their children, and what steps he is taking inside the classroom to help them grow academically and as a person. As a result, Mr. D has adopted a strategy that includes communication inside and outside of his classroom.

> Last year, I had the opportunity to write a student his black belt recommendation. So, I went there to see that. Going to a student extracurricular activities outside of school, and the parent is there, that's like, "Okay, he really cares about my kid." Going to extracurricular activities outside of these four walls builds that trust as well.

As hard as Mr. D works to bond and establish trust with his students and their families, he works just as hard to do the same with his colleagues at Dream Ridge Elementary. Mr. D believes his fellow teachers view him as "someone they can go to" and "a positive role model around the school." However, Mr. D is cognizant of how easily being the positive role model can transform into African American males in the education field, often being sought after more as disciplinarians than as effective educators. Mr. D told me he read an article that says, "Black teachers are tired of being the behavior specialists," and that when he read it, he said to himself, "this is true." Mr. D says that he has experienced the stereotype of being a behavior specialist at Dream Ridge.

> When they see Black males in the school, it's like, go to his room. One of the AE students was on the ground one day, and two the teachers was like, "Can you come get him?" The only thing it took for me was to stay right there, and reached down, and he got up.

Though some at Dream Ridge may consider Mr. D a behavior specialist, others know him for his effectiveness as an educator. Mr. D has been named Rookie Teacher of the Year for his district, and North Carolina PTA Teacher of the Year. Mr. D is also the grade-level chair for the fourth-grade team at Dream Ridge Elementary. Mr. D was recommended for the position by the teacher in the classroom next to his. He was surprised by the nomination since he was a beginning teacher, and she had 7 years of experiences on top of holding the position last year. Though initially hesitant about accepting such an important responsibility, Mr. D came around and began to embrace his new role. He now says he likes the "leadership role" and does "a great job at it."

I felt like being voted in as grade-level chair was a significant achievement for Mr. D, considering he is so early in his career. I asked Mr. D to share the responsibilities associated with being grade-level chair.

> Grade-level chair, for every grade level, you meet with the grade-level chairs and the principal. You give the information back to your grade-level teachers. When we have our grade-level meetings, we have it in my room. I should have the agenda made. I should know what data points we need to talk about, what restorative practices we're doing. Are we using the iBuddy classroom system? Have all the teachers sent their emails to the cafeteria if we got a field trip? It's like the main contact person for that grade level.

It was clear to me from his responsibilities as grade-level chair at Dream Ridge Elementary that Mr. D was seen as more than a disciplinarian; in fact, he was an educational leader.

Mr. D asked if he could read something to me and paused to look up a document on his laptop. The document was a letter written by one of his students in support of his candidacy for the North Carolina Center for Advancement and Teaching (NCCAT). Mr. D said he wanted to read me excerpts that stuck out to him. The student wrote, "He was as strict as Baby Bear's porridge: just right . . . I learned a lot and had fun doing it. In other words, MR. D is a great teacher."

> Sometimes, I can be a hard teacher and strict, but I like to have fun, too. But for her to say "He was as strict as Baby Bear's porridge: just right." It was okay. It wasn't too hard on them, even though sometimes they could've felt it was. They took something away from why I was being like that. That's what really brings me here, building those genuine relationships with these students. They keep me young.

I asked Mr. D what has changed since he became Rookie Teacher of the Year for his district, and later North Carolina PTA Teacher of the Year.

> Once I became Rookie Teacher of the Tear, and North Carolina PTA Teacher of the Year, you're an educator. That's what everybody see. Everywhere I go, I know I'm an educator now. I remember at open house, a parent walked down and they came here and asked me, "Do you have any more room in your class?" A lot of students, some of the student's parents, when they came to open house, they said, "My student wanted you." They were so happy when we got it in the mail. It's like, they want me for a reason. I was like, "Well, I'm glad." But that breeds pressure.

While in high school, Mr. D was student council president and considered himself to be popular, and in college he was Mr. Senior and a member of the Royal Court. Even as his past positions of hypervisibility suggest Mr. D is somewhat gregarious, he says that "it is weird" for him to have chosen a profession like teaching, since a good deal of his students' success depends upon his ability to keep them focused on him while he delivers instruction. According to Mr. D, he is very bashful and shy, and does not like it when attention is directed toward him. For Mr. D, being named Rookie and PTA Teacher of the Year just added to the pressure he already placed on himself to be the best teacher for his students.

> All the attention is on you. To this day, if I have my observations some days, I start busting out in sweats. When administration in here doing my observation, my students would be like, "Mr. D, why are you sweating so much?" And I'd be like, "I'm nervous." I don't know why I tense up sometimes when I have observation and when people are looking directly at me. And I think that comes from me being my biggest critic. I want to do everything so perfect that if I make a simple mistake, it's like, mmm. So, I think it's me being my biggest critic and don't want to mess up. I want to do everything so perfect.

Mr. D says that sometimes the pressure of living up to the standards of Teacher of the Year bleeds into his personal life as well. He told me he loves what he does, but sometimes it is hard to separate Mr. D at school, from Dabnus at home. Mr. D believes this is especially challenging for him since Dream Ridge is in the same city as Midway University. After Mr. D had been named Rookie and North Carolina PTA Teacher of the Year, he and his friends contemplated what Midway's homecoming would be like for him that year.

> We're talking about homecoming, and you know homecoming, is homecoming. And a lot of people are like, "How are people going to perceive you out there?"

Mr. D wanted to have a good time with his friends like he had done every year at homecoming since he was a freshman. But this year, he felt was different. Pictures and videos of Mr. D were prominently placed on his district's website. Some of his students' parents were also Midway University alum, and there was a good chance he would run into many of them on campus. Despite his initial anxieties, at the end of the day, Mr. D was perfectly fine with running into his students and their families outside of school. He told me that when he sees his students outside of school they come up to him and give him a hug or a high-five. Mr. D believes it is good for his students to see him not wearing a dress shirt and tie.

> They can see me wearing shorts or wearing my Adidas outfit. I think that helps a lot also, the way I dress outside of school. I think that it's easier for students to see that when I'm outside of school . . . "Oh, he's my teacher, but he's also human."

While listening to Mr. D talk about his impressive accomplishments in just 4 years as an elementary teacher, I wondered how he would like to grow as a teacher as he continues his career, and how his school district can support him to reach his goals. First, Mr. D said that he would like to be more organized because it helps his day run smoother. Second, Mr. D would like to have a deeper understanding of the content he teaches.

> Knowing the content, knowing the reason behind the content. I think anybody can teach a curriculum, but actually knowing the content, and knowing why you teach it, and how it can relate to the real world.

Mr. D believes he has improved at helping his students make the connection between their course work and real-world applications but would like to get better.

Mr. D says he thinks the district can help him continue to grow as a teacher by having other more experienced teachers observe him while he instructs his students, and then provide him with feedback on areas of improvement.

> I love soaking up critiquing. I will probably get nervous, start sweating because I'm my biggest critic, but I think to get that input from somebody from another school . . . feedback by other teachers in the district, I would like . . . and I get to meet new BTs, and we can talk, I think that would really help.—I think that will help not only grow me but the whole district.

Mr. D mentioned that he would like to meet and have conversations with other beginning teachers in his district to grow professionally. If he continues teaching at the elementary level, he will eventually be considered a veteran teacher. So I asked him whether he was a part of, or considered being a part of a group of African American male elementary educators. Mr. D told me that he is not a part of a network of African

American male elementary teachers within or outside of his district. However, Mr. D said that it "would be good . . . would be awesome" if there was such a group in which he could participate.

> I think that'd be a great barbershop talk, just thinking about it, if it was a panel of all Black male teachers. whether it's a Facebook group, a GroupMe of teachers, so we can relate to—and not only relate to. We can give ideas, too. We can hang out. We can go to each other's schools. I think that'll build a better bond with them, the Black males. I never thought about that.

My last interview with Mr. D took place on a cool, rainy night at Dream Ridge Elementary. Once again, Mr. D was finishing up his Power Up afterschool program, and I was left to find my own way to his classroom. This time, there was no escort, so I asked a custodian who pointed down an already darkened hallway. While I walked down the hall towards Mr. D's classroom, the motion from my steps triggered the LED lights in the ceiling, illuminating the floor ahead of me. As I sit here writing Mr. D's portrait, I see symbolism in how a hallway once devoid of light began to brighten with each steady step moving me closer to my destination. Like those lights in the hallway, each time I asked Mr. D a question, his answers lit the path leading towards my objective of understanding of why African American males desire to teach elementary students, and their lived experiences.

Indeed, I felt a sense of accomplishment, knowing I was about to finish my interview sessions with my first study participant. Granted, I still had two other participants left to interview, but completing this phase of the process with Mr. D, despite scheduling conflicts and late evenings, was the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel"

that I needed to prove to myself that I could complete this study. So, there I sat in Mr. D's classroom, eager to learn how he believes his story ends.

When Mr. D arrived at his classroom, visibly tired from a full day of teaching and his after-school program, I asked him what it was about teaching that keeps him in the career. He said, "I don't know . . . it's nothing like just," after pausing momentarily, he continued, "making an impact on a child."

> It's something about making a difference in a child's life and being that person that they can go to, building that trust with a student. I feel like earning a child's trust is different than a grown-up's trust. A child's trust, you got to keep that trust. If they're here for years, they don't forget a lot. I like building that trust with my students and having that bond, just not with my students, but all the students in the building.

Mr. D went on to say that his kids push him. He knows his students have expectations of him, which he says has changed his perspective on everything. Mr. D believes that one of the most important expectations his students have of him is to come to school every day, and he takes it very seriously.

> I don't like missing school. I have diabetes, so sometimes . . . I can just lay in my bed. I'd be like I don't feel good, sugar might be low. But once I walk . . . in this building and I'm seeing my kids, it's like it go away. It may start back at 3:00, but from the time they in here, I feel like their problems and their needs is so much bigger than mine. If I don't feel like coming here, it's not about me. These kids, they have so much going on some time, and I feel like in this classroom, it's a place of stability. So, when they come here, I'm here, it's that stability. They could go home and see all these different people. I don't want my kids coming in and having to see another teacher every other day. This is the place of stability for most of the kids. And it could be more than just my classroom. It could be all the kids in the building, when they're coming down this hall -- some of the kids I don't even have expect that high five from me or that, "What's going on?" or "What's up?"

I followed up by asking Mr. D how he feels when the students he has taught move on to another teacher or graduate. Mr. D told me, “it’s a bittersweet feeling.”

> You’re happy but it’s like dang, I don’t want them to go. The group that just left me, I had them for a year and a half because I looped up. When I see them in the hall, I’ll be like, “Those still my babies.” You build a relationship with them, and it’s a great relationship to have. I love it.

As Mr. D spoke about his experience as an elementary teacher, he did so with passion, using words like love, trust, and relationship frequently. I asked Mr. D if having a passion for educating elementary-aged students was necessary for his work, or if he could treat it like a nine to five job.

> I think you have to have passion. You’re not going to be able to just come and leave. You’re going to start caring about these kids. The kids are going to start caring about you. You’re going to get their trust. I think you definitely have to have a passion for doing this because of the aspects that come with it. You’re going to have to spend time with these kids. Some kids you might have to tutor in the afternoon. I think an African-American male teacher have to have that passion to grow kids, to have that lasting impact on them, to make them want to be future Black males in the elementary classroom.

Mr. D said he does not think people understand the amount of time and effort it takes to be an effective teacher. Arriving to work at 7:45 am and leaving at 3:00 pm is not a normal day for Mr. D. Mr. D says that he often comes to work early and leaves late because “it’s a lot of preparing to do.” Many Sunday nights during football season, Mr. D is at home preparing for Monday morning meetings and weekly lesson plans, while watching trying to watch bits and pieces of football games.

It was obvious to me that in order to be the teacher, Mr. D makes sacrifices. Maybe it is the kind of sacrifice that makes having a career in elementary education unappealing to African American men. I wanted to hear Mr. D's thoughts of why there are so few African American male elementary teachers, so I asked Mr. D what factors he believes keep African American males from teaching elementary.

> Not being seen. It's a hard job. It's a lot of time, a lot of energy. When I'm talking to some of my friends, they say, "I don't like kids." Some kids can be hard to work with. You got to have a lot of patience to be an educator.

Mr. D suggests African American males who are pondering an employment field to enter, or maybe even considering a career change, take an opportunity to substitute teach at an elementary school. He believes that some African American males who feel they do not like working with children may have a change of heart once they have actual experience working in the classroom. Mr. D says that he has suggested substitute teaching to his African American male friends who indicated to him they are looking for a different career path. Mr. D tells them "that one or two days when you're sitting in the classroom, that can really impact not only you but the kids."

Besides overcoming the unfamiliarity of working with small children, Mr. D points to financial stability as another possibility of why African American males forgo careers as elementary teachers.

> I think African-American males, we have a lot to wear on our shoulders. I know for me, I'm good financially. However, it comes times . . . somebody in my family need money. "How can I get to where I need if I'm always helping somebody out in my family?" I haven't learned yet how to say no, so I give it and I would rather me . . . struggle for a couple of weeks then see a family member.

> It's hard to get really financially-stable when you're always having to help people financially around you. Everything is going up and it's hard to stay in this one place when your pay isn't moving up with the surroundings around you. I really feel like we should get paid more or get raises more, not just emails saying, "Oh, somebody haven't passed this yet." (Mr. D was referring to an email that teachers in his district received that stated the state legislator and governor had still failed to reach an agreement on the budget three months into the fiscal year, which included pay raises for teachers.)

Mr. D says that he does not like the feeling of financial uncertainty he has felt recently, so he understands why the pay commensurate with teaching at the elementary level would give some African American males pause when considering elementary education as a career. Even though currently single, Mr. D imagines financial stability being of prime concern for African American males who currently have a family to support, or those thinking of starting a family in the future.

Mr. D has considered the financial implications of him starting a family and what that might mean for his future as an elementary teacher.

> It's a lot of students that you see that aren't really stable. And some days, I tell people, "I need to see what can I do to adopt them and start a family." Starting a family will cost more, so . . . I don't think I could do this field with a family, especially with a large family . . . if I am a single parent, I don't see it happening for a long time if that does happen.

However, Mr. D believes the prospects of starting a family are greater if he marries.

> If I get married, I will be able to stay in this field. I see me and my spouse, I see us making enough money for me to stay in a field that I like.

What is more, Mr. D sees elementary education as a profession to which he can always return if he takes time off to rear his children.

> If it's the time where I do have a child, and I have to leave the field, and I do get married, I feel like I can always come back. I feel like my heart is still in the classroom. At King Energy, I was making more money, but here, I am working here happy. My heart is happy. I'm content.

Mr. D is forthcoming about the financial challenges he faces now and possibly in the future, due to his salary as an elementary teacher. However, financial security is not the primary determinant for why he remains an elementary teacher.

> Right now, to me, I'm more focused on being that person to make a difference, being that person that my kids need to see, being that anchor that holds them down when they need it. And just showing up sometimes is enough for me. The hugs you get...some things are priceless . . . some things money can't buy: showing a child how to love, you can't buy that. I'm at the point where the money thing is going to come. I'm sure it's going to be hard times, but if you keep doing what you love, happiness, money can't buy happiness. That's something with King Energy, even though I made good money there, it's like I didn't go every day happy. It was like I got to get on this phone or send this email. That's all I'm doing all day. Teaching, it's rewarding. It's so much more rewarding than money can offer.

Another factor Mr. D believes may prohibit African American males from choosing elementary education as a career are social constructs of male and female occupations, reified by colleges' and universities' lack of effective strategies to recruit African American males into their education programs. Mr. D suggests that education departments at colleges and universities do more to publicize the quality of their education programs and offer financial aid incentives to African American males who major in elementary education. Mr. D also offers an internal recruitment strategy of education departments actively seeking and engaging African American males whose major status is undecided or undeclared. Mr. D says, "you could change your major at

any time," and elementary education just may be the change some African American male students are looking for.

Mr. D said that ultimately, we must work at "breaking those generational curses of . . . what needs to be your typical man career." A curse, if you will, that he himself had to break.

> When you ask a boy what's their stereotypical career, you never hear—well, I never hear—"I want to be a teacher." It's "I want to be a fireman, or I want to be a lawyer. I want to be a doctor." "My dad went to the army, and then truck driver. Teacher was nowhere in my background. I had to find this. But I have five nieces and nephews that are eventually going to grow up . . . one of my Black nephews when somebody asks him, "Why do you want to be a teacher?" He could say, "My uncle was a teacher."

Mr. D shared an experience he had with one of his nephews at the school his nephew attends. His nephew attends a private school, and Mr. D said when he visited the school, he noticed that none of the teachers there were African American. Mr. D attributes the encounter he had with one of his nephew's teachers as his personal contribution to dispelling stereotypical social constructs of who are custodians of and have authorization for the dissemination of knowledge.

> I go to his school and I ask the teacher, "How's he doing in reading . . . What's his Lexile level . . . my nephew was there and I think it's important for him to see that communication like, "Oh, he know about teaching." Like she isn't the only person that know what's going on in the classroom. That's important to me.

Mr. D says he is glad his nephew knows that there are African American male teachers who are knowledgeable about their work, "because he sees me."

After spending time with Mr. D, I do not doubt his commitment to his students or elementary education as a profession. Still, I asked Mr. D, what, if anything, would cause him to leave his position as an elementary teacher. Mr. D said, “nothing can make me leave” unless he earned a Master’s degree in another field. Even then, Mr. D believes he would “still be working with people, still be educating in some way and making that impact.” Mr. D views the classroom as the optimum means of reaching students and having a direct influence on their life outcomes.

> I really love doing this. I have a lot of Black friends that used to be educators. Now, they are admin. Something I ask myself, “Is that different? Is it different being a Black admin than being a Black teacher? Are you making the same impact that you did when you was a teacher?” That’s something I always think about when going back to school. “Will it make the same impact?” And I don’t think it would. I don’t think Black administrators make the same impact as Black educators in the classroom every day because you’re not—they’re seen but not a lot, like an educator in the classroom.

I concluded my final interview with Mr. D by asking him a question that came to me while we were discussing his experience as a high school student. I asked Mr. D what he would tell a gym full of 12th-grade African American males about the advantages of becoming elementary teachers?

> I will let them know my experience, how I only have one teacher, Black male teacher, that made a difference in my life. Now, I have an opportunity to come speak to you guys on why education for our future is important. I will tell them, it’s a lot of time. It’s rewarding. I would tell them a perk is having the summer off. I will say that it’s not a lot of jobs where you get two and a half months off. A lot of questions will be about pay and I would honestly have to tell them, This is a job you can’t do for a pay. You probably won’t get a raise when you’re looking for it, but it’s rewarding. If you don’t know what you about to do, give it a chance. You’re going to notice that you can make that impact on the kids. I think this is the biggest way you can give back to your community. it’s rewarding . . .

> It's a lot of work . . . it's a service that you don't even know was a service. I give a lot of my time to not only my students but this school, not only the school but the family. Once you start giving time to families, it's like you're out there in the community.

Summary

> If one can make a difference, then two is so much more. (*I Am One* by Chrisette Michele)

In conclusion, Mr. D wants his work as an elementary teacher to be the difference of one, while bringing other African American males to elementary education, so that together they can do much more. Mr. D knew he always wanted to be a teacher, ever since he had his first African American male teacher in the ninth grade. He learned that his true passion was teaching elementary students, because of his experience of student teaching in an elementary school.

All along Mr. D's journey, he has had to face adversity, which he persevered with purpose, determination, and love. There have been late nights and disappointments along the way, but Mr. D has stayed the course, knowing how his presence in the classroom could positively impact the life outcomes of his students. There may be many factors that keep some African American males from becoming elementary teachers, but I, for one, am glad to learn of the ones who keep teachers like Mr. D in the classroom. Factors like love, determination, trust, sense of community, and a passion for students transcends them all.

Mr. D's Epilogue

After reading his portrait, Mr. D said,

It made me feel empowered and wanted to continue making a difference in not only children lives but everyone I come into contact with. I felt at this point in my life I am directly where I need to be. Sometime at 28 I see myself comparing myself to my circle making sure I am growing to make sure I am not failing, not only myself but my close friends. I am grateful I was able to participate because I read some insight that I did not know.

CHAPTER V

PORTRAIT OF MR. LANCE ANTHONY STACEY

. . . What a man's supposed to do and his responsibilities.

Introduction

Lance Anthony Stacey, as he is now called, was born Lance Benedict Anthony, Jr. in 1975. When Mr. Stacey was 5 years old, his biological father left him, his mother, and his younger brother and sister. It would be years later before Mr. Stacey would learn the explanation for why his birth father was not in his home. He says the reason his father left was that he either could not or did not know how to rear children.

When Mr. Stacey was 7 years old, his mother remarried a man that Mr. Stacey asserts "was very instrumental" in his life. Mr. Stacey told me his stepfather reared him and his siblings as his own and walked him "through the steps of what a man's supposed to do and his responsibilities." The bond between Mr. Stacey and his stepfather was so strong that he decided to make his surname Anthony his middle name and replaced it with his stepfather's surname Stacey.

Now, Lance Anthony Stacey is a married father of five sons of his own, one of which was born a couple of weeks before our second interview session. Before beginning our formal discussion, we shared a laugh about the challenges that come with a new baby, such as late-night feedings and what seems like an incalculable number of diaper

changes throughout the day. Still, Mr. Stacey was smiling from ear to ear as he spoke about his newborn son and how ecstatic he was about becoming a father again.

Mr. Stacey is proud of his family at home and his Big Creek PK-8 school, where he teaches fourth grade. The students enrolled in grades PK-5 represent 75% of the total student enrollment at Big Creek, a small PK-8 school built in 1993, with a listed student capacity of 496. This year Big Creek's enrollment climbed to 517 students, after falling to an all-time low of 371 students 5 years ago. The elementary school Mr. Stacey attended when he was a student is in the same school district where he teaches now but was a K-5 elementary school much larger and located much closer to the inner city than Big Creek.

Mr. Stacey tells me that growing up, his dream was like "mostly every little Black male's dream," to become a professional football player. He says, "the thought of being on TV, being in the newspaper, being in magazines, that big money" was his biggest motivator growing up. As self-gratifying as Mr. Stacey's dream may initially sound, he immediately follows up with his desire to take care of his parents financially, and sincerely believed his talent as a football player was the best avenue to secure his and his family's financial stability.

When I first met Mr. Stacey, a professional football player was not the career that immediately came to mind. Certainly, Mr. Stacey has an athletic build, and I can tell that he works out and stays in shape. However, I am barely six feet tall and Mr. Stacey is at least four to five inches shorter than I am. I, like many others Mr. Stacey has come into contact in his life, judged and perhaps even discounted him before learning of his talents.

I would soon learn that Mr. Stacey was a gifted defensive back in college, earning an opportunity to try out for the National Football League (NFL) teams.

Mr. Stacey worked out for NFL teams such as the Carolina Panthers, the Green Bay Packers and the New York Giants, as well as a Canadian football team in Toronto. The scouts told Mr. Stacey he was too small to play for teams in the NFL, even though he had established himself as second in the nation defensive back while in junior college at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, and accumulating 20 interceptions his last season playing at Charleston Southern University in Charleston, South Carolina. Mr. Stacey told me one scout said that he did not know if his team could take the chance of signing him because of his height. So, Mr. Stacey challenged the 6'7" scout to try and receive a pass while he guarded him. Mr. Stacey tells me the scout declined his offer of a skills exhibition, and also declined to offer him an NFL contract.

Still determined, Mr. Stacey engaged a sports agent to seek out opportunities in smaller professional and semi-professional football leagues. Initially his agent propositioned him with playing overseas, but Mr. Stacey was not interested because he was about to marry. Later, Mr. Stacey's agent contacted him about the possibility of playing for a team in Toronto, Canada. During the work out session with the Toronto team, Mr. Stacey suffered what he did not fully realize at the time was a career-ending injury.

> I had to work out for Toronto. I end up blowing my quad . . . running the 40-yard dash. I was like, "Oh, no. I got to finish this. I got to finish this." So, I'm trying to get into the workout. They were like, "No, your quad is done." You can probably see it through my pants, it rolled up. He said, "You got to get major surgery." I

> said, “I ain’t getting surgery. I got to finish this workout.” They said, “No. You are done.” I’m like, “No. What am I going to do now?”

In just 4.5 seconds, all the years Mr. Stacey had dedicated to achieving his dream of becoming a professional football player had vanished, and with it, the promise of financial stability for his parents and soon to be wife. Nevertheless, defiant as ever, Mr. Stacey returned home to begin rehabbing at Duke University. Eventually, he made it back onto the football field, this time as a record-setting running back. However, after a string of minor league championships, he began to consider whether it was time for him to move on from football. Mr. Stacey had been passed over time and again when his body was in the best conditioning of his life, and now though performing well, it obviously was not the same.

> So, I’m like, “Okay, do I want to keep playing football or do I want to start growing up?” Talking to the coach he used a scripture on me, “Put away childish things. It’s time for you to be an adult.” So, I came back . . . where I’m from, started working out, working as a trainer.

When working as a trainer at a spa and health club Mr. Stacey met some African American males who suggested Mr. Stacey utilize his knowledge of football and instructional skills to become a coach. At first, Mr. Stacey was pessimistic about becoming a football coach, but decided to give it a chance. While coaching, Mr. Stacey met another group of men who, after observing how well he was instructing the players about the fundamentals of the game, suggested that he should consider a career as a teacher.

> I end up getting into coaching. Then from there it was a couple of guys said, "Man, you're great at teaching stuff. Why don't you think about becoming a teacher?" I said, "That's not where I'm going. I don't want it. I don't want it." Then I talked to my grandma, I said, "These people keep . . . talking about me going into the classroom." She was like, "Baby, I already had that dream a long time ago that you were going to be a teacher." I said, "Grandma, no."

Despite his initial trepidation and repeated resistance, Mr. Stacey began to substitute teach at State Street Elementary School. Mr. Stacey says it did not take long before State Street's principal noticed how he was interacting with the students. Using his own life's story as a reference, Mr. Stacey said he would talk to the students about behaving appropriately and valuing education. He was teaching his students the same lessons he learned from his stepfather and coaches at Charleston Southern. Mr. Stacey tells me he has always pulled knowledge and insight from others.

> As I grew up, I started pulling from different people. It makes me think about a superhero like Superman's power. I pull from him and add to me. One of them was my godbrother that's now down in Atlanta. He had some issues with his family, so he ended up staying with us. I had my mom and dad, I really didn't listen to. He was there as an older guy. He said, "Look, let's go play basketball." He's taking time to spend with me, taking me out to play basketball, walking me through different things, teaching me about God, and about the Bible, and everything. That's what I was pulling from him. My grandmother, her wisdom. She was just at my house all weekend looking at my new son, and we sat down and talked. She asked me how was school going, and keeping God-focus, and is that my focus, and how am I helping these kids reach their next level, not passing EOG, but what am I doing, and what does God expect me to do? Definitely several coaches that I pulled from . . . professionalism. It's just random things that I just find in people that I'll pull to them and add to me to make me better for who I am.

The thought of someday becoming a professional football player lingered in Mr. Stacey's heart, even after he had made up his mind to move on to more adult aspirations.

Holding on to his dream made Mr. Stacey doubt himself when the principal at State Street Elementary said, “I can see you as a teacher.” For Mr. Stacey, subbing at State Street was a stop-gap until he could develop a feasible plan for returning to football.

> I’m trying to do this right now because I think I might want to go play football. But he’s like, “No. Next year, I’m going to recommend that you become a teacher.” I said, “Do you really want to do that? Hand me a classroom by myself? I’m 200 pounds. I’m walking through there and I’m like, “Y’all better sit down somewhere. I don’t want to hear that noise.” “He said, “Yeah, I think you’d be great at it.”

K–12 Experience as a Student: “An Average Student Just Floating on Through School”

Mr. Stacey teaches in the same district that educated him as a K-12 student. In fact, Mr. Stacey has taught at an elementary school that he attended. The first elementary school attended by Mr. Stacey was Parson Village Elementary. He remembers being one of a few African American students enrolled at Parson Village at that time. Now, Parson Village is a magnet school of almost 800 students and 60% students of color.

While at Parson Village, Mr. Stacey says he “struggled through reading,” and despite fervent opposition by his mother, he was retained in the third grade. Later, Mr. Stacey’s mother was informed by an administrator at the school that it was likely he would not have needed to be retained had the school “put the proper steps in place.” Mr. Stacey had done poorly on the California Achievement Test, known widely at the time as the CAT. I remember taking the CAT when I was in elementary school. I can still hear my teachers’ voices as they read from the instructions on how to fill in the scantron answer sheets by making our “marks heavy and dark.”

For Mr. Stacey, standardized tests have always been a challenge for him, and I would soon learn that those challenges followed him throughout college as well. The school may have failed him, but Mr. Stacey's mother was not. She knew that sports was a major focus for Mr. Stacey at the time, so she said, "if you're going to play sports, you got to have some good grades."

Mr. Stacey transferred to Hope Elementary when he was in fourth grade, which happens to be the same elementary school and grade level he would teach almost 2 decades later. While at Hope, Mr. Stacey says that he received the additional support he needed to be successful. Most of the academic support came from the afterschool tutoring program sponsored by the church located next door to Hope Elementary. Mr. Stacey told me the tutors would assist him and the other elementary students with "phonics and basic reading comprehension."

Another change that happened when Mr. Stacey entered fourth grade at Hope Elementary was being taught by his first African American male teacher, Mr. Rambler. Mr. Stacey describes Mr. Rambler as "a heavier set Black guy" who was accustomed to using his fraternity paddle to dispense corporal punishment to correct poor behavior. Admittedly, Mr. Stacey says he was "a little knucklehead" back then, so being disciplined by Mr. Rambler may have occurred often. However, Mr. Stacey points out that he remembers Mr. Rambler more for the way he challenged him academically than for his role as a disciplinarian.

> He was one that I looked up to as far as looking at the males. It was . . . his presence. I was nervous about who he was. I was like, "Oh man. I'm scared here." As I got to know him and understand what he was about, and the purpose

> . . . everything just started rolling from there. Kids do what they do, so I challenged him every once in a while. Then he brought it back to me and said, "No, this is not what we're going to do. This is what I expect." He was strong.

Mr. Stacey told me that his grandfathers had all passed away by the time he was in fourth grade, so other than his stepfather, Mr. Rambler was the only African American male for him to look up to and model.

However, even with the extra help he was receiving from the church's afterschool tutoring program and a solid African American male teacher for him to look up to, Mr. Stacey still felt like an "average student just floating on through school." The feeling of floating through school would continue through high school, where Mr. Stacey says he was "that average student . . . making Bs and Cs, a couple of As and Bs." In high school, Mr. Stacey "loved the sciences," but "struggled in math" as he had struggled with reading in elementary. It was not until his algebra teacher, a White female by the name of Ms. Scannell, helped demonstrate how math and science connected.

> She was more of a mentor to me because I struggled in math. When she started walking me through that and then started talking about, "You know, I think you'll be a great teacher in the future." I was like, "No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not hearing that."

Ms. Scannell was the first teacher who Mr. Stacey recalls suggesting to him to consider a career as an educator. Even after Mr. Stacey had completed his algebra class with Ms. Scannell, she continued to mentor and tutor him in math through high school. For years, Mr. Stacey kept in contact with Ms. Scannell, only recently losing contact when she left the district to work for a university.

Experience as a College Student: "All This Money Just to Get in the Classroom, Just to Teach"

Mr. Stacey had always dreamed of playing professional football, and though he saw himself as an average student all through K-12, his grades and athletic talent were sufficient for him to enroll in a D-1 university as a scholar-athlete. However, once on campus, Mr. Stacey admits that academics was an afterthought compared to football. He says he was "there to play football" and that the first month he was there, he did not do course work.

> The literacy class, they showed me this long syllabus and it had all these papers. I was like, "I can't do this." So, going class to class trying to do football and I was like, "I can't do this."

Needless to say, Mr. Stacey's parents were not pleased with how their son was squandering his opportunity for a college degree from a well-respected university. When Mr. Stacey told his stepfather he was thinking about leaving school, he responded with, "you got to grow up." Instead of allowing his son to drop out of college completely, Mr. Stacey's father sent him to Silver Spring, Maryland, to live with his aunt and attend junior college. Soon after arriving in Maryland, Mr. Stacey enrolled in junior collect at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland.

Gifted with a second chance at higher education, Mr. Stacey was more focused than ever to succeed athletically, but now he was also driven to develop academically.

> There is where I really had to grow up. If I wanted to play football, I had to again, grow up. I had to buckle down in my work. Being able to compete with some of those guys that dropped down like I did, you had guys from Notre Dame, Rutgers, all of them up there. So, I had to compete with them on a day-to-day basis. Then

> my aunt said, "If you can compete with them on the field, why can't you compete with them in the classroom?" So, that's when I started saying, "Okay. Let's work this out. Let's find out what my true problem is and let's fix it."

Mr. Stacey began to take advantage of the academic support systems Montgomery College had in place for its students. Besides attended group study hall, Mr. Stacey also sought assistance in one on one sessions. After an assessment, it was determined by Mr. Stacey's tutors that he understood the material being taught, but standardized tests had constantly plagued him. He says he always believed he knew the question asked but was "overthinking" and thinking about how to answer "in a different way" then what test creators were wanting.

Nevertheless, after finishing his second season of football as the number two defensive back in the nation, and completing his two-year Associate in Arts degree at Montgomery College, Mr. Stacey says he graduated with offers from 20 universities to finish his last 2 years of athletic eligibility playing football for them. Mr. Stacey had taken his aunt's advice and proven that he could compete with other college athletes both on and off the field. Now Mr. Stacey had to decide where he would go next and how it would bring him closer to the NFL. He thought to himself, "Do I want to go back home? Go to Carolina? Go to Duke? Go back to State? What do I want to do?"

The choice became clear after a football game in which Mr. Stacey was particularly impressive in his play.

> It was at one of the football games that I had . . . three interceptions . . . and I made a dude fumble. One of the coaches approached me after the game, he was like, "We weren't here to see you, but we're interested in you. We want to offer you right now." I was like, "What school is this?" He's like, "Charleston

> Southern." I'm like, "What division is this?" He was like, "1- AA. We don't win a lot of games, but we would like to, at the end of the season, fly you down and let you see what the school is about." So, I said, "When's the flight? Let's go to South Carolina."

Sporting a "big bear coat," Mr. Stacey flew down to South Carolina from Maryland. After freshening up at the hotel, Mr. Stacey says a couple of would-be teammates came over to hang out and talk with him. The next day Mr. Stacey went to meet with Charleston Southern's head football coach. Mr. Stacey remembers the coach acknowledging that he was an All-American defensive back and that the coach was aware of his "dreams of going to the next level to the pros." However, the coach was honest with Mr. Stacey saying, "I can't promise you all of that. The only thing I can promise you is that I'll help make you a better man."

The coach also told Mr. Stacey that his attendance at Charleston Southern would certainly lead to a promising football season, as well as enhance the overall strength of the team. Yet, that was not what stuck out to Mr. Stacey. Once again, someone was offering him their mentorship in how to become a man. Later, Mr. Stacey would meet the president of this "small school" that he believes may have been known in the past as Charleston Baptist College. Mr. Stacey told me that the president said to him that he knew he loved "the football thing, but who are you as a man?" He says the president went on to say, "You're coming into a school that has a great reputation. We know from your background and coaches talking that you're a good guy. But what can you bring to our school besides football?"

After flying back home, Mr. Stacey was still contemplating the offer by the coach to make him a better man, and the question from the president as to his value add to Charleston Southern. When Mr. Stacey arrived home, he says he discussed the conversations he had with the coach and president with his family. He had done well at Montgomery College, earning a GPA of either "3.2 or 3.5," graduating on the Dean's list, and securing offers from big-name colleges like Syracuse, Ohio State, and Ole Miss. Still, Mr. Stacey could not stop thinking about the words from the coach and president, and how they made him feel.

> I was like, "Man, it'd be great to go to a big school like that, but none of them talking about what that guy, and his coach, and the president was talking about." I said, "You know what? I think I'm going to sign with them." I graduated in December, started down in January . . . from that point on, they grew me.

Mr. Stacey said that even though Charleston Southern was a predominately White institution, in terms of students and staff, he felt the people there embraced him. He recounts spending time in his football coach's home with his wife and kids. In fact, Mr. Stacey became so close to his coach, "a White guy," that he was calling him dad. Soon, Mr. Stacey became a mentor himself when he joined "a group going out mentoring younger kids."

> During several of the sessions we . . . basically talked about what is a man's responsibility? Not just in the streets, but when you get a job, what are you supposed to do in that job? When you get married, what are you supposed to do in your house? We had deep discussions about what's going on in your family, what do you see, what do you think a real man is? A lot of those conversations got deep. The hardest guys were crying . . . talking about what is a man supposed to be? What's the ideal? That thing just stuck with me.

Eventually, Mr. Stacey completed 2 years at Charleston Southern, earning a 2.8 GPA and a bachelor's degree in kinesiology with a minor in biology. Mr. Stacey said that people encouraged him to seek employment as a football coach if he was not able to make an NFL team. However, Mr. Stacey planned to enter a physical therapy program, if becoming a professional football player did not work out. If not a physical therapist, then maybe a chiropractor.

Mr. Stacey says that his grandmother encouraged him to consider the career options he would have with a good education, especially if his long-shot dream of becoming an NFL player did not manifest. Mr. Stacey told me that he sometimes ponders how different his life might have been if he could just stop chasing football.

> I keep thinking . . . "Man, what would it have been like if I didn't chase this football? I'd probably been a chiropractor." My own practice, making a large amount of money that eluded me. I love the human body. I love working with my hands.

Mr. Stacey says that his sister was the one who ended up going to school to be a chiropractor, and he thinks to himself, "I could have been doing that."

After injuring his quadricep muscle during a workout session for a professional football team in Toronto, Canada, Mr. Stacey began teaching in the same district he was a student in through their lateral entry program. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's webpage, "lateral entry allows qualified individuals to obtain a teaching position and begin teaching in a classroom while obtaining a professional educator's license as they teach." This form of entry into the teaching

profession is no longer available as of June 30, 2019. However, another alternative pathway to teaching, known as Residency License, has taken its place.

In order to satisfy the educational requirements necessary for obtaining a professional educator's license, Mr. Stacey enrolled at a university located in proximity to the district where he was teaching.

> I knew a couple of people that were there, and so, they gave recommendations for me. I went and started taking classes. I was like, "These classes don't work in the classroom. There is no connection to this. This is ridiculous." When you look at teaching . . . versus book knowledge, a lot of times it did not mesh. They're like, "No, you got to do all this because you got to pass the Praxis." Pass what Praxis? "You got to pass the Praxis." I said, "What? I don't do standardized tests." It was stressful.

Mr. Stacey says the thought of having to take a standardized test to prove his knowledge took him back to when he was a third-grader who was retained. He said he was given "a 3-year window" to pass the Praxis, but if he did not, then he would be out of the classroom, out of thousands of dollars in tuition, and out of a job. After learning of the Praxis requirement, Mr. Stacey considered whether he should continue along the lateral entry pathway to teaching or if he should seek employment in a completely different field.

Ultimately, Mr. Stacey decided to continue his quest to become an educator. Mr. Stacey recalls the first time he sat for the Praxis.

> I'm sitting here like, "Okay, I got to take this Praxis." You have to write a lesson plan . . . also . . . it's multiple choice. Everything you covered in class, the philosophies, all of these philosophers, and all these great thinkers. I was like, "Oh my god."

In the end, Mr. Stacey missed passing the Praxis by 7 points. The second time he took the Praxis, he missed passing by 5 points. After failing the Praxis by 3 points on his third attempt, Mr. Stacey decided to reach out for help.

Mr. Stacey said he was told, "the questions are not for you as a Black man." He says he was advised to think as if he were White. Mr. Stacey does not recall the university providing him with any assistance in preparing for the Praxis other than "go to the library and study." As a result, Mr. Stacey was desperate for any advice he could get if it meant passing the test. He had become frustrated with what he considered wasted time and money, taking a test that was keeping people who wanted to be teaching out of the classrooms.

After failing all these tests, I was like, "All this money just to get in the classroom, just to teach."

> I'm like, "All these teachers that get into the classroom, they end up leaving within the first and second year because they can't deal with the kids, especially Black kids in the classroom." Here, I got to pass a test because I want to teach and help them, while the White teachers were coming in, didn't like the demographics, couldn't deal with it, and then they leave. I'm like, "Do I really want to keep fighting this?"

The answer was an emphatic, yes. Mr. Stacey has always been a fighter. After being retained in the third grade, he went to afterschool tutoring and began making better grades. When he was unfocused his first semester of college and had to leave to enroll in junior college, Mr. Stacey fought on and off the football field, becoming a true scholar-athlete. And, after suffering what many told him was an injury from which he could

never recover enough to play football again, he relentlessly trained until he retired himself from play, winning several championships along the way.

Why now, after overcoming adversity his entire life, would Mr. Stacey surrender to a standardized test? He did not. Mr. Stacey says that he realized that he had a purpose, and if it was meant for him to be in the classroom, then he would pass the test. After his sixth time taking the Praxis, Mr. Stacey was ready to continue his path toward becoming a licensed teacher. Still, he wondered about the advice to think like a White person when answering Praxis questions.

> Just thinking about, why would somebody tell me that? Is the test really scripted around that type of thinking? Like, how is my thinking different than White people's thinking? It's like, it doesn't make sense. "How do I think as a White person?" It doesn't make sense. When they gave me the strategies, I was like, "This is ridiculous."

Some of the teachers at the school where Mr. Stacey began his lateral entry told him they understood what he was being taught in college, but the course work did not often apply in practice. They counseled him to use "common sense" and to teach to his students' level. Mr. Stacey found a way to incorporate what he was learning in his college courses in his classroom, while at the same time establishing a deeper understanding of pedagogy for himself.

> I had to go to the library. I had to research, "Okay, what does this philosopher or what does this scientist say about this? What is the next level?" Adding more than just the basic . . . not what they provide in class. I had to do that. Having those other teachers and being in the classroom saying, "Okay, put it into your own classroom. If this kid is struggling, what would you do? Walk me through the process. What would you do?" The book says this. We don't have that, we have this. What can you do?" That's when it started laying it out.

In addition to working towards his teaching certification as a part of his lateral entry requirements, Mr. Stacey was also pursuing a master's degree in education online through Grand Canyon University. He says the master's degree required a lot of work, and he was hoping that since it was at the master's level, he would be able to gain some efficiencies by using what he learned in his master's program in the teacher's certification program. However, Mr. Stacey told me he received push back from instructors in the teaching certification program.

Mr. Stacey said he could not understand why the teacher's certification program instructors would not accept the way he completed his work when the instructors from his master's program did.

> At GCU, they gave us the template of how to teach . . . and how to . . . write lesson plans. When I came to the class, I said, "Okay, I already know how to do this." I was already teaching at the time. I was lateral entry. She says, "No, we're going to walk through the process." I said, "I have no problem, but I already have the work done." She said, "How do you have the work done?" I said, "I know the lesson plans. I know what I need to teach . . . I have to teach it in my class."

Mr. Stacey says that he and the instructor could not come to an agreement and ended up having to take the discussion before the dean for mediation.

> The dean said, basically, "Leave him alone. He knows what's going on. He's already teaching. He already has the information. Just let it go." That was one of my biggest battles even going in to take my Praxis . . . I know and knew the application part of what I'm supposed to do in the classroom, but the book says, "You need to do this."

Mr. Stacey remembers being one of three African American males who took a class in elementary education together. He does not recollect any particular bonding

taking place between him and the other African American males. Mr. Stacey says, "everybody was there to take the class and become teachers." However, Mr. Stacey would meet with teachers he worked with outside of school just to talk about "what things can you do to get better in the classroom?" He says the informal gatherings were not done regularly, but from time to time they would all meet at someplace like Chili's and talk about their lesson plans or other points of interest at their school.

Another source of support for Mr. Stacey while he was pursuing his teaching certification and Master's degree in education was his principal at the time, Dan Steed. After all, Mr. Stacey had begun the lateral entry program, in large part due to Mr. Steed's insistence that he transition from a substitute to a full-time teacher.

> I came in as a sub, and then they transitioned me into teacher assistant. When he talked about me being a teacher, I was like, "No, I can't do that." He was one of those guys that every once in a while would call me and talk to me and say, "How is it going? What's your lesson plan look like?" He wasn't a principal where he's going to pop in your classroom and just hover around you all the time. "As long as the kids are learning and do what you're supposed to, I'm not going to mess with you." He wanted to know those bits and pieces before I actually got into the classroom. So maybe, one or two calls a month, like on a weekend, "What are you doing? What's going on? Okay, you got the math. Okay, you need anything?" It was that structure. We developed such a tight relationship.

Mr. Stacey says that Mr. Steed and his wife have done so much to help him. Mr. Steed has long since retired but continues to check up on Mr. Stacey from time to time.

Mr. Stacey's Teaching Experience: "Other Teachers Didn't Want Them"

When I asked Mr. Stacey how he likes being an elementary teacher, he responded, "I love it!" Over his 17-year career, Mr. Stacey has taught second, third, and fourth grades. Mr. Stacey has taught at a charter school as well as in the public school system.

He has also taught at two schools that have K-8 grade level configurations. Mr. Stacey says he has learned in his almost 2 decades of diverse teaching experience to recognize the uniqueness his race and gender brings to his chosen career as an elementary teacher, but that it is his complete and utter dedication to effective pedagogy that gives him the ability to challenge his students academically. No matter where Mr. Stacey teaches, his students and their life outcomes are at the center of his thoughts.

> I enjoy teaching, especially these kids. I've taught kids that are low-income, kids high-income, kids that can't even read words to kids that can read college textbooks. My whole thing is just letting them understand that school, for them, is steps to help them reach their goal. Teaching them how to be responsible in their education, teaching them about a young man growing up, a boy growing up to a man, what are his responsibilities, and finding out what their issues are as far as at home, as far as who you stay with, what's going on, what is the family like, what are some issues you're dealing with at home? I become transparent to them . . . "This is what my life was like." We have some connections. So, let's walk through this so I can help you not just now, but your future.

Mr. Steed, principal of Due North Elementary School, had given Mr. Stacey his start in education when he hired him 17 years ago as a substitute elementary teacher. It was no longer likely that Mr. Stacey would become an NFL player, even if his heart still held a glimmer of hope that he would one day realize his childhood dream. Mr. Stacey was a man now, and all he had learned along the way to becoming a man had taught him to put away childish things, like dreams of fame and "big money," all from playing a game.

Instead of Stacey being prominently displayed on the back of a team jersey, it would be on stationary slid into a plastic placard beside the door leading into his mobile classroom. The constant call of "Mr. Stacey, over here, Mr. Stacey," would not be from

reporters, but from pre-pubescent fifth-graders vying for his attention. Furthermore, substitute teacher pay is a far cry from the big money Mr. Stacey believed necessary for not only securing financial stability for him and his new bride but also to support his parents financially because that is how he planned to thank them for all they had done for him growing up. Mr. Stacey tells me that he had to come to an understanding within himself that he had "actually finished playing football," and that his life's work now would be "dealing with all these fifth-grade kids going through puberty."

> "How do I deal with these kids?" They're like, "Mr. Stacey, you got some muscles." I'm like, "Yeah, and we got work to do." Trying to make that adjustment from dealing with adults at the gym, dealing with football at college. Now, I have that upper elementary school, so I got to figure this stuff out.

Eventually, Mr. Stacey did figure it out and began to settle into his role as a substitute teacher.

When Mr. Steed hired Mr. Stacey as a substitute teacher at Due North Elementary, Mr. Stacey recalls four other teachers from Carolina being hired at the same. He believes "all left because the demographics were changing at Due North because we were getting the kids from Grandover Projects." Mr. Stacey had no plans of abandoning students who looked like him just because of their residential zip code. Mr. Steed assigned Mr. Stacey as a math remediation teacher, even though he had "struggled with math back in high school."

> I came in as a math remediation teacher in elementary. I had my own little trailer, walk them out there, fifth grade, we do math out there. We laughing, jokes, send them back to class. Got my data and I was like, "This is some good data."

Mr. Stacey's math remediation students were making gains, and Mr. Steed took quick notice of Mr. Stacey's talent for moving students academically.

Mr. Stacey was not only having a direct impact on his fourth-grade math remediation students, but he began to positively influence other students at Due North as well. Mr. Stacey told me he needed to encourage "young Black males and . . . young Black females," because he knew they "are behind in a lot of different ways." Today, Mr. Stacey speaks in terms of how the way he teaches is good for all students, and for the most part, focuses more on how he is needed in the classroom because of his gender rather than his race. However, while he was a new substitute teacher, he concentrated on how he, as an African American man, could connect deeper with the African American male students than the other teachers at Due North.

> Every Friday, I had a boy's group. It started off with just fourth grade, and then all of a sudden fifth grade started, and then there was third grade. He said, "You need to do this with the boys across the school." I was like, "This thing is getting too big." He's like, "Look, you just tell us what days you want to do it on. We'll get coverage for you at the school." I'm like, "Okay." So I started going okay, "On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, I'll meet with a certain group of kids and y'all just recommend them, and I'll go with them." From that point, I was like, "This is my calling. This is where I need to be."

Mr. Steed believed that teaching in elementary is where Mr. Stacey needed to be as well, and as a result, he transitioned Mr. Stacey from a substitute teacher to a teacher assistant and finally approached him about becoming a full-time teacher through lateral entry. Mr. Stacey was initially cold to Mr. Steed's suggestion that he become a full-time teacher. First, Mr. Stacey was not sure what becoming a teacher through lateral entry

meant, and second, he was not yet convinced that teaching elementary students was a job he wanted to establish as his career.

When Mr. Stacey inquired about the requirements of entering the teaching profession through lateral entry, he was told that he would have three years to acquire his teaching certification, but that he could teach and earn pay while he to the requisite classes for certification.

> They said, "You're going to have to get these classes." I was like, "How many of them?" "A bunch of them, because we got to get you certified to teach." And I'm like, "I don't want to go to school." So, I'm sitting here like, "Okay, what do I do next?"

Understandably, returning to school for his teacher certification made Mr. Stacey feel like he was starting all over again. Besides, he did not want to teach, so why should he return to school? Mr. Stacey eventually did well in college, but it had been a constant struggle for him. Now, he was being asked to relive the struggle, except this time, while holding down a full-time job and family at home.

Fortunately, Mr. Steed understood the difficulties Mr. Stacey was facing as a lateral entry candidate and was not about to let the challenges of juggling family, career, and education overwhelm Mr. Stacey. Midway through Mr. Stacey's lateral entry, Mr. Steed assigned him a mentor, Felicia Pender. Now Dr. Felicia Pender is a principal in the same district in which Mr. Stacey currently teaches; however, she was the reading specialist at Due North during the time she mentored Mr. Stacey.

> She was my mentor throughout the process. I love Felicia. I mean, it was so cool that we talked so much, started talking to her husband, and . . . the kids. We

> became a big family, and that's what I look back on and I was like, "Man, this is what teaching is about." Where you have people that are willing to connect with you on a bigger level than just, "Hey, how are you doing?" Walk down the hall and you're out the door.

Mr. Stacey says that Dr. Pender was not a mentor just to be collecting a paycheck. He told me Dr. Pender would often walk in his classroom and ask questions about what he was doing in preparation to educate his students. Mr. Stacey recalls how some of their conversations would transpire:

> She would walk in my classroom, "Stacey, what you doing today?" "Hey, Felicia, yeah. I'm doing this." "No, let me see what you got." "Okay, this is what I have going on." "You know, we have to do it better on that, right?" "Yes, ma'am." That's how it rolled.

Mr. Stacey remembers how Dr. Pender went to bat for him when he was about to complete his lateral entry and was told that the district was going to "pull all the lateral entry teachers out of the classroom." By now, Mr. Steed had been replaced by Dr. Hall as the principal of Due North Elementary, and Mr. Stacey's pathway to teaching was in jeopardy of becoming a dead end. Mr. Stacey had reluctantly entered the lateral entry program and enrolled in school to complete the required coursework for his teaching certification. Now, the rug was being pulled from out from under him and his students.

> I was like, "What?" My principal at the time was Dr. Hall. She gave me a letter, it said, "Stacey, we're going to have to pull you." I was like, "You can't pull me. I'm halfway through. I'm about to get this thing." Felicia 's like, "No, you need to stay in this classroom." The kids that I have . . . I only had maybe about 12 or 13 kids and they were off the wall. I said, "Well, what are you going to do with the class? You're going to dissolve the class?" Felicia said, "No, you will continue to teach here. I'm going to sign off all the paperwork as the teacher. You continue to

> do what you do." I was like, "Should I go let you do that?" She said, "Don't worry about it because the kids you have, those teachers don't even want them."

Mr. Stacey says students who sometimes had to be restrained were often assigned to his classroom because the "other teachers didn't want them." Mr. Stacey was teaching a full classroom of students, the majority of whom had behavioral issues, all the while being compensated at the substitute teaching rate for the first half the year, and teacher assistant rate for the second half of the year. What is more, there was the possibility that the work he had done returning to school and at Due North Elementary, may have all been for naught.

Yet, with the help of his mentor Dr. Hall, Mr. Stacey was able to exit lateral entry and join the other teachers at Due North Elementary as a certified teacher. Mr. Stacey says his first year was rough because he still had the mentality of a football coach-to-player relationship.

> I tried to do it military style and realized it's not going to work. I had some mentors at the school that helped me through the process. They just said, "Everything you learned in school, you almost have to throw it out the door and you just have to be real with the kids."

Mr. Stacey thinks it was within his second year of teaching that he realized that elementary students needed male teachers, and how he as an African American male with his ability to "connect with the kids . . . can influence a future generation." Apparently, this was a view of Mr. Stacey also shared by his principals, because he believes he was intentionally and consistently assigned students of color or students known to have behavioral problems.

> There was an intentional thing, and I learned early where the division was. "You're a Black male. We know you can handle some of the behavior problems. So, this is what you're going to do."

Mr. Stacey says that one of the teachers told him that the reason he was assigned students with behavioral problems, was because he was not certified to teach Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) students. She advised Mr. Stacey to pursue AIG certification so that he may also "teach the higher-level kids." Mr. Stacey was told by his colleague, "if you get the AIG certification . . . they have to evenly divide the kids out because all of you all are certified now."

Following his conversation with his fellow teacher, Mr. Stacey decided to discuss the advice he received with his principal. Mr. Stacey says his principal agreed having an AIG certification would be beneficial to him and was told he should move forward with pursuing the accreditation. So, Mr. Stacey did as he was advised, but to his surprise, the method of assigning students who have certain demographics to his class did not change.

> When I got it, I was like, "Okay, now they're going to divide it up." It wasn't divided up that much. I still had those same kids. I said, "You know what? It is what it is. It looks good on my resume. I'm going to go with it." I'm a Black male.

Mr. Stacey began to believe that because he was an African American male, he was guaranteed to have students of color, who were not performing well academically, and were known as problem students.

Mr. Stacey says that he eventually left Due North, the school that had ushered him into elementary education, and began teaching at a charter school. Kings Landing is a

kindergarten through eighth-grade charter school that Mr. Stacey describes as diverse. Mr. Stacey told me his classroom was about half White and half students of color.

During his 4 years at Kings Landing, Mr. Stacey taught second and fourth grade, and he did not experience the high level of behavior problems he had at Due North. What is more, Mr. Stacey had a familiar face in Mr. Scott, another African American male teacher on staff at Kings Landing, who taught fifth grade. Mr. Scott was familiar because he and Mr. Stacey had also worked together at Due North Elementary. In fact, Mr. Stacey has worked with Mr. Scott for almost half of his teaching career. When Mr. Stacey began to think about how long he has known Mr. Scott, whom he believes is "a good guy," he realized that there had been at least one other African American male teacher at the school in which he taught for the majority of his teaching career.

Mr. Stacey says that changes in Kings Landing's administration led him back to the public school system. After a 4-year hiatus, Mr. Stacey returned to the public school system, teaching at the same school he attended as a child. However, the student demographics had changed since he was a student there from largely African American to "a heavy Hispanic population." Mr. Stacey said when he taught at Hope Elementary, that was the "first year having a lot of Hispanic kids." He told me he did research before he started because he was "trying to understand their culture."

> When I came in, it was kind of scary to listen to how they really view African American males because of what they've seen on TV . . . the perception. When they saw me, and even their kids, the boys and the girls, they didn't know how to approach me. I thought it was just going to be the language thing. But when we started talking and communicating, everything started opening up.

Mr. Stacey was clear with me that it was not just the Hispanic families at Hope Elementary who had negative perceptions of him because he is an African American male; it was also the White families. Mr. Stacey says that African American men are often portrayed in the media as "the angry Black man" and that his students sometimes hear what their parents say about African American men, so when they are in his classroom, "they don't know exactly how to proceed." Over time, Mr. Stacey developed a strategy he still uses today at Big Creek that attempts to combat students' preconceived notions of him because he is an African American male.

> One thing that I do every single year, is I make myself known around the school. Not just with my grade level, but especially third-grade kids that are coming up. I always go down there and say hello to the class. I see some kids coming, we high-five, so they already know who I am before they get to fourth grade. We buddy with kindergarten. So, I go around the kindergarten, say, "What's up?" Say hello to them. Even the kids that I've had, and some that I may not have in middle school, we dab, we hug, just say what's up. Trying to show them that I'm not a drug dealer. I'm not a jock. I'm not trying to run the streets. There are intelligent Black men around, so I try to shape that and mold it into their minds. I think it's important for those kids to have role models, especially young Black males, also Black females.

It was at Hope Elementary where I first met Mr. Stacey because he was my son's fourth-grade teacher. Indeed, my interactions with Mr. Stacey as a parent made him a desirable study participant to me. I witnessed firsthand my son's academic growth, as well as his constant yearning to discuss all things Mr. Stacey. My son was more excited than ever to learn language arts, math, and science, but he was equally excited to learn from Mr. Stacey about his fraternity, what it meant to be a leader, and to have a teacher who was willing to engage with him in dialogue, not just directives.

I was then, and continue to be now, impressed by how Mr. Stacey positively impacted my son's fourth-grade year and likely had an impression on him that will last him a lifetime. At least I am hopeful that it will. I hope my son's positive experiences with his African American male fourth-grade teacher will remain with him for at least as long as my negative interaction with my White female fourth-grade teacher, who said I was nothing but a nappy-headed Black boy. After all, it is the purpose of this study. To understand lived experiences of effective African American males who teach elementary students and what keeps them in the classroom, giving other students what Mr. Stacey has given my son, and what I wish I would have had an opportunity to encounter.

Mr. Stacey would teach at Hope Elementary just the one year he taught my son in fourth grade. He tells me that he loved the students he had at Hope that year, but that he did not feel like he "fit in" with some of the other teachers and administrators. So, at the end of the year, Mr. Stacey left Hope Elementary, finding a new home at Big Creek.

Mr. Stacey told me that someone "downtown" thought Big Creek would be a good fit for him and recommended that he apply for an open fourth-grade position there. Mr. Stacey would miss the students at Hope but was looking forward to his new journey at Big Creek, which also happened to be right around the corner from his home. Mr. Stacey says that when he first met Dr. Henry, the principal at Big Creek, that Dr. Henry "didn't know how to perceive me."

> I've had over 10 years, but he wanted to observe me the full spectrum. He said he observed me four times and still couldn't figure out who I am.

Mr. Stacey told me he and Dr. Henry were supposed to have a 10- to 20-minute screening interview, but it turned into an hour-long conversation.

One of the topics Mr. Stacey and Dr. Henry discussed was how, in the past, Mr. Stacey felt students with low academic achievement and behavioral problems were placed in his class. Mr. Stacey recalls saying to Dr. Henry when he first started, "Do you know what happens with Black males? They want to put all these kids in your classroom." Mr. Stacey says that Dr. Henry "tries to balance out the class better," but still places "certain students" in his class. Although Mr. Stacey still receives what he perceives as the more challenging students, he believes from his conversations with Dr. Henry, that the assignments are a part of his overall strategy to improve academic achievement at Big Creek. Mr. Stacey believes from discussions with Dr. Henry, who is also an African American male, that he understands the challenges he faces as an African American male elementary teacher.

When Mr. Stacey began teaching at Big Creek, he says that he wore slacks and button-up shirts or polos, like he had worn at other schools he taught in previously. He told me dressing in that way is "a good appearance" for his students. However, he says sometimes he is glad he dresses "casual" like he was when we met that day for his interview. Mr. Stacey was wearing a purple and gold t-shirt, the colors of his fraternity, jeans, and tennis shoes. He was running a little late to meet me in the office, because two students had got into an altercation, and he had to restrain them and bring them to the office.

> Every once in a while, just like today, there's some kids that I might have to restrain and I don't want to be tearing my clothes. With the cohort that we have this year, we have seven to eight kids that are behavior problems, and I have four. A lot of times, it's redirecting. I'll get a call, "Mr. Stacey, you need to go to the playground. We got a kid out there." I'll have to leave my classroom, somebody got to cover, and I have to go out there and find out what's going on. I'll go halfway down the street because a kid took off running. So, I try to be relaxed in what I wear.

Mr. Stacey told me that in talking with other African American males with whom he has coached football, they are not interested in teaching elementary students because of the age of the kids and knowing they would be called on as the disciplinarian as he is, but not having the support from the school when dealing with troubled students. Mr. Stacey says he does not always have an answer for their concerns, because he "ran from it" before finally "walking right into it" himself.

> It's hard because they're going to have to examine their personal life, examine who they are, and how they can make a difference. A lot of times, people see it, the difference can be made in elementary school. It's hard to figure out how to promote and push African males in elementary. That fear is a big thing that keep them out. Head of a family, the pay, dealing with a lot of these kids that have behavior problems, it's rough.

However, "rough" of a decision it may be for other African American males to teach elementary students, Mr. Stacey says he understands the impact he has on his students and the larger community. He told me while giving blood he struck up a conversation with a woman from California who asked him what he did for a living. When Mr. Stacey informed the woman that he was a fourth-grade teacher, she said to him that she had male teachers before, but never an African American male teacher. Mr. Stacey says, "it was something unique to her."

At Big Creek, there is Mr. Stacey, who teaches fourth grade, and an African American teacher assistant in fifth grade. Mr. Stacey says the fifth-grade teacher assistant is new to Big Creek this year, so they are "still getting to know each other." Mr. Stacey was able to tell me that the fifth-grade teacher assistant has a wife who teaches third grade at Big Creek. Other than an occasional interaction, Mr. Stacey says he does not talk with the teacher assistant that often.

However, Mr. Stacey says that he has a good relationship with the African American male teacher, Dr. Pine, who teaches a "six and eight" grade cluster.

> I love messing with him, talking with him. He's a fun guy. A lot of the middle school kids get caught off guard by him because he's probably 6'3", 6'4." He's a good-sized guy and he's real with them. And so, he'll laugh and joke, but when it's time to get real, you're like, uh-oh. So, I love that about him. He's good. we laugh and joke about the kids in the school . . . It's a great relationship.

I could tell from how Mr. Stacey was describing how Dr. Pine's interfaces with students, that there were striking similarities to the way he describes his own interactions with his students. Additionally, Dr. Pine and Mr. Stacey have coaching football in common. Dr. Pine coaches the middle school football team, of which Mr. Stacey's stepson is a member.

Mr. Stacey says that he and Dr. Pine "often talk about not just behavior, but how to make the school better." Mr. Stacey told me he and Dr. Pine also discuss ways to encourage leadership among their students, sometimes by Dr. Pine's middle school students coming down to Mr. Stacey's classroom to "mentor" several of his students.

> They come down Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. I use them more of a behavior check with some of the kids that present a challenge. So, they just talk to them, interact, maybe play games or something with them like that.

Working with teachers like Dr. Pine and having a principal like Dr. Henry has given Mr. a good feeling about Big Creek. Mr. Stacey views Dr. Henry as "a good administrator" and somewhat "protective." He says that Dr. Henry sees him as "a Black male being professional" by the way he conducts himself when communicating with students, parents, and other staff members. Mr. Stacey told me that Dr. Henry has remarked that parents have come to his office and talked to him about how good Mr. Stacey is as a teacher.

Mr. Stacey believes that Dr. Henry wants the best for him, and he feels like Dr. Henry has his back. Mr. Stacey recounts the time he saw a couple of his goddaughters in the hallway of Big Creek and hugged them. He says Dr. Henry came up to him later and said, "Mr. Stacey, you might want to watch it." Mr. Stacey says he told Dr. Henry, "those are my kids."

Mr. Stacey did not take offense to Dr. Henry's warning, but instead chalked it up to him just "trying to be protective." Just like when Mr. Stacey's grandmother tells him, "better watch them kids. They'll lie on you." Mr. Stacey says the "fear" of being lied on about having inappropriate contact with a student is a likely reason why other males, in general, may not feel teaching in elementary school is a career for them.

> You always hear about these things on TV, whether they're true or not true, always got to be guarded. I did talk to other males, not just Black males, and that's one of those things that they also are worried about too, because one lie, and everything is done.

Mr. Stacey says that he grew up in his city and is known by many people in his community and surrounding communities. Furthermore, he coached football within his school district and in counties around his district. He says the repercussions of a lie about him doing something inappropriate with a child will affect more than his teaching status or him personally. Mr. Stacey believes a lie of that magnitude will affect his immediate and extended family, his fraternity, and "a whole bunch of people" that know him within the area. Yet, Mr. Stacey's love for his students is enough to calm fears he may have in his own mind.

> I'm always constantly looking but also making sure . . . to be open and transparent to the kids. Every day, I tell them I love them. They say I love you back, and we have that communication, and we hug, and just say, "Hey, what's going on? Everything's good?" Then go about our business.

Mr. Stacey also tries to communicate openly with parents. He says that he sometimes wonders what the different parents of his students think of him being an African American male teaching elementary students. Mr. Stacey told me he greets his parents with pleasant smiles and handshakes, throwing in a joke now and again to break the ice and form a connection. He says he wants his families to understand that he is completely focused on developing the whole child, not drilling them with test prep and demanding they behave themselves.

> I'm not going to be here to beat you up every day. That's not my job. I've known teachers and I've had teachers that were yelling and fussing every single day. You could tell they didn't like their job, even some now. I started to understand that these are kids. This is our future and I have to be open. I have to be transparent to let them see the real me because I want to be the same person that they see here, same person I am at home.

When he first started teaching, Mr. Stacey says he used to "drown the kids in so much homework," and when they failed to turn their homework in, it was always an excuse of "I have church . . . I have football . . . I have basketball . . . I have cheerleading." Mr. Stacey said he felt like the excuses for why students were not living up to their responsibility of completing homework went on for years until he had kids of his own. He recalled, "Then I had kids. I'm doing this during the day. Now, I got to go home and do homework with my kids. I'm like, 'Oh my god, this is not really happening.'"

Mr. Stacey began researching homework policies of other elementary schools within his district and discovered that a couple of schools perceived as high performing "have a no homework policy." As a result of his research of practices of other schools in his district, as well as studies about the impact of homework on student achievement, Mr. Stacey says he started "to understand that . . . kids need to be kids."

> When I grew up, I didn't have a lot of homework in elementary school, and the groups and the centers that we had was not literacy and math centers. They were more social type things so we could socially interact with each other. It wasn't until middle school, high school that we started getting that homework. If they've worked hard at school, allow them to be kids at home. They don't need all that homework.

Still, Mr. Stacey says he has some parents who are "old school" and expect their child to come home with hours of homework each day.

> "They need to come on with homework." I said, "For what? They're at school all day. When you work all day, you don't want take . . . work home. Sometimes, you have to because you got to get paid. You got stuff to do. These kids let them be kids. Let them run around, jump." In here, it's structured all day. They get a

> little unstructured at recess, lunch in the cafeteria, it's still structured. When do they get unstructured time? If they got to go home and spend an hour or two hours doing homework, have dinner, and then go straight to bed, when are you interacting with your child after being with us all day?

Mr. Stacey feels like reducing the amount of homework his students have to complete is his way of providing more quality time for families. He says he understands how his colleagues can sometimes view rearing their students is a part of their job because school is where students spend the majority of their wake hours. Mr. Stacey feels so strongly about the subject of homework and its potential to limit family engagement with one another that he makes it a point of discussion at open houses and parent-teacher conferences.

Overall, Mr. Stacey says his students adapt to his class fairly easily, partly because of his strategy of introducing himself to them while they are still in the lower grade levels. However, he told me that his students' parents are often skeptical of his pedagogical abilities, and have no problem questioning him. Mr. Stacey says his students' parents ask him, "where'd you go to school at . . . are you certified?" After he provides parents with a listing of his degrees, Mr. Stacey said the typical response is, "Oh, okay."

Mr. Stacey told me that Dr. Henry sees the growth that his students have and as opposed to his experience at Hope, allows him and other effective teachers at Big Creek, to teach the way they best see fit, as long as they "stay within the curriculum."

> That's what I love. This is how it was when I was at Due North. It was that freedom to teach. When I come in and say, "Okay. I need you all to do this." They do it. He doesn't come in and question me at all.

Mr. Stacey likes the autonomy he has at Big Creek and in his classroom, which he attributes to his position as a teacher. He says that people have suggested that he take his talent of working with students to the next level by becoming a principal, but does not believe he will still have the same flexibility to educate in the best way for his students if he leaves the classroom. Mr. Stacey told me, "there have been pulls" to leave the classroom from people, Mr. Steed, and even his current principal, Dr. Henry.

> I tell them, "You know, I look at the classroom. I look at administrator. If I do administrator, I want my own." I want my school to be done this way, I want to be allowed to do it because I know the kids. I know what's going on. But being in public schools, it's not like that and we've had that conversation. I've had other people to ask me when I'm coming out, and it's just one of those things that 16 years in I still think about. I don't know.

Mr. Stacey told me he would not trade teaching in elementary for another career at this point in his life. He says that he wishes the pay was better, but that he is "in a position where money is not an issue" for him because he has "done so much networking and coaching."

> I've studied financial things, Dave Ramsey, Automatic Millionaire, to where I guess I would say I'm not like the typical teacher where I don't know where all my money is going. I don't worry about my check at the end of the month. I know where it's going, how it's divided, and I'm good. I think that's one of the biggest things that teachers have to be able to do, and not worry about their pay check because we're not in this for the pay. It's just we have to know how we need to budget . . . money. It's that financial literacy that makes it a little bit easier for me to do the teaching and not have to worry about going out and get another job. I've talked to my wife, "You know, I need another job." She says, "For what?

Mr. Stacey says he took it upon himself to become financially literate. He had no illusions of becoming rich as a teacher, but he loved working with students so much, that

he figured out a way to support his family financially, while at the same time working in a career that he believes is his calling. Mr. Stacey feels so passionately about financial literacy that last year he started teaching his fourth-grade class about how they should begin thinking now about how to manage their money when they are adults.

> I gave them a budget and I told them, "This is what you need to buy. This is what you got to have. Now, figure it out." We did the background work on Dave Ramsey . . . Automatic Millionaire. Then, we did the background work on Elizabeth Warren, 50/30/20. Once they learned all that, they got to pick which one they wanted to do. Through that, they started making their budget, going through and found out, "Oh, I can't spend my money all on this car. I want to Uber all day." I said, "No, you can't Uber all day." Somebody said, "I'm going to drive a bike." "You're not going to ride a bike to work all day." I actually got let them choose a city that was in North Carolina and look at how much it costs per city. They were able to figure that out, and a lot of parents loved it.

Mr. Stacey told me he wished he had learned about finances and budgeting when he was in elementary school, or at least high school. He believes had he known then what he knows now, he would be even better off financially. During Mr. Stacey's first marriage, he was a teacher for few years before he and his wife started having children. However, once the children came, Mr. Stacey said sustaining his household financially was "rough" until he "understood the financial literacy part."

> It was always, "I'm the head of the house. How am I going to feed my family?" Looking at this paycheck every month, I'm like, "This is not going to work." So, at that time back then, I was working at Due North Elementary School, and then working part time at a gym, and also working at GNC. I started noticing that the more money I made, the more the government took. I had to understand that the focus on life was not about working three and four jobs to make ends meet. It dealt with the budgeting. It took me a while to understand that. But again, looking at that pay, it was rough. Even when I was married, my ex-wife, she worked at UNC. She had a pretty good system, but I was still getting paid more than she was, but still trying to make those ends meet, and that stigma of being head of the

> household. I have to understand, yes, as a male, I'm head of the household, but it takes working together. "What are some things that we need as a family, and what are some things that you want, and what are some things that I want?" Those are the things that had to be worked out. It was rough.

Despite the financial challenges that Mr. Stacey faced by choosing elementary education as his career, he sees what he does every day in the classroom as "trying to reach the bigger need." Mr. Stacey is clear that the pay is not at the level that he wants, but says he believes his "purpose," the reason why he is on Earth, is to teach elementary students. Mr. Stacey told me he has turned down "higher-paying jobs" like coaching college football teams in the past because although he loves coaching and is passionate about helping young people succeed athletically, his calling is to teach them how to succeed academically. Mr. Stacey is confident that if he follows the calling God has placed on his heart, the financial stability of his family will take care of itself.

Up until this year, Mr. Stacey had coached high school football as supplemental income, but more because he liked interacting with kids in a sport he loved and that had provided him with so many opportunities, as well as heartache. Mr. Stacey told me that he has learned a lot about teaching from his coaching experiences, and vice versa.

> I had the opportunity to go down to Alabama to Nick Saban's coaching clinic about 2 years ago. That's where I sat down with him, and it was another coach, and he started telling me what coaching is. "You have to be a teacher first. That's number one." Because these guys, you have to teach. Even though they're athletic, they still don't know everything, so you have to teach them exactly. It starts in the classroom. It doesn't start with getting out in the field and showing them out there. It starts in the classroom where you're showing videos, you walk them through it, have them draw things on the board. From there, you watch the videos, and you go outside, and get in your small groups like you do in a classroom. Do it in small groups and then you get with another group. Like, I coach defensive backs we get with the line-backers. We work together. Then all

> of a sudden, when it's time for team, we bring the whole thing together. When I started thinking about that, "I was like man..." So, in my classroom right now, I have four literacy groups. I teach four different lessons. In math, I teach three different lessons, so I break it up into small groups. My bringing it together is when we do the benchmark and we do the EOG. I'm taking it in small groups, and then I'm letting them work with partners. Right after recess, I let them get a partner to where they can work with each other that are not in the same group. That's what I pull from the coaching into the teaching, and then from the teaching into the coaching. Even to this day, I still use some of that stuff for the kids in the class.

Mr. Stacey told me that at Big Creek they do not have an A, B, C, D grading system, but he still feels like it is expected that his students demonstrate career or college readiness by them passing a test, rather than having a more intense understanding of content. He says that not just in his district, but he feels that throughout the country, teachers are "teaching kids how to take the test," which he posits is how he learned "how to pass the Praxis." Mr. Stacey told me the consequence of that kind of learning experience for students, is that they end up forgetting what was covered, and not learning at all.

Mr. Stacey has a "whatever it takes" attitude, saying, "I just know these kids have needs," and "I'm meeting the needs." He told me that he does not mind sharing his own struggles as a student with his students if it will help them understand the process of learning. Mr. Stacey believes he can teach all of his students, including the most challenging academically and behaviorally, above the "basic fourth-grade curriculum." Yet, Mr. Stacey knows it will take support from his school district to accomplish his goal.

> Definitely some classes that will teach you how to deal with those kids that are within the EC program, but not make it to where we're sitting for four, five, six hours doing all of this PowerPoint presentations, sitting through all of this stuff.

This year Mr. Stacey has three students who "are on the AU spectrum." Mr. Stacey told me, "it's hard to deal with sometimes, because I don't know exactly what that is." In a moment of self-reflection, Mr. Stacey acknowledged that he needs "to be more willing and open" to students in his class that he is not used to. Mr. Stacey says that he is used to "kids that have behavior problems . . . kids that are AIG . . . average kids," but feels unprepared to interact effectively with students with special needs.

In addition to his unfamiliarity of teaching students with special needs, he also lacks strategies for communicating and working with their parents. In the past, Mr. Stacey has been able to win parents over with his intellect and his charisma. He has been able to speak to parents confidently because of his credentials and effective pedagogy, proved by the consistent growth of his students. However, Mr. Stacey concedes that new strategies are necessary to build trust and rapport between him, his students, and their families if he is to educate them in the manner they deserve. Mr. Stacey shared an experience with the parent of a student with special needs whom he is currently trying to partner with in her child's education.

> I have a parent, the child has qualified, but the parent wants me to do all the services for EC, but don't want her child labelled. So, the conflict is now not with the child, it's with the parent. Then he comes in and doesn't do the work. "Okay. How do I deal with this?" Because I know in my mind, that fear, that it might turn out to be that Black-White thing. I don't talk to the father. The father is never around here. He's in the house, but he's not here. It's always the mom shooting me four and five emails, and I get to the point where some of that stuff I don't want to respond to. Then she will send an email saying, "You haven't responded to my email and I need a response." I don't want to be their angry Black male.

Mr. Stacey also shared with me that he has another student with special needs who he has a better relationship with her parents, but is having a hard time connecting with her.

> I have another one, and she's going through, but I'm trying to connect with her, but it's rough. Mom and Dad are okay, but I don't know if we want to make that connection. So again, looking at: Is it her disability or is there something else going on? I don't know how to navigate that. That's been my biggest struggle this year.

Mr. Stacey hopes that his district will be able to help him answer: "What is the thinking process? What is the teaching process? What can this kid handle? If I say this, will this kid take it too literal?" Mr. Stacey desperately desires for all of his students to succeed but feels the way he has gone about it historically, is not adequate for this year or going forward. He says he feels his "classroom management is fine," and that "the curriculum really doesn't change," but that his "biggest thing . . . a constant battle," is he does not "know how to connect" with his students with special needs.

Summary

> That's what I love . . . That freedom to teach.

From the first time he could remember, Mr. Stacey believed he was destined for the NFL. Football was back then and continues to be today a large part of his life. When Mr. Stacey was in elementary school, football motivated him to work hard at his academics so that he would be able to play on his football team. Later, football helped him to get into college. It was Mr. Stacey's intense love for football that credits for both

bringing him to the brink of dropping out of college and propelling him forward to earn his college degree.

Throughout Mr. Stacey's life, he has had men who he says taught him how to grow from a boy into a responsible man. Some of those men, like his stepfather and fourth-grade teacher, were African American. Others, like his football coach at Charleston Southern and principal that introduced him to elementary education, were White. They inspired in Mr. Stacey a desire to pay their sound advice forward to other young men who have challenges at home with their families or at school academically.

Mr. Stacey believes he was called by God to become a teacher so that his life could be an example and inspiration for other elementary students. Although he has been successful in growing his students academically, Mr. Stacey is focused on developing the whole child. As such, Mr. Stacey is the constant student, always searching for ways to understand better how to reach students and their families where they are. I believe Big Creek, and the world, are better when they men like Mr. Stacey teaching in their schools. Although an opportunity was offered to Mr. Stacey to comment after reading his portrait, he declined to provide an additional statement.

CHAPTER VI

PORTRAIT OF MR. KURT WILSON

I see now more than anything that education for me was my calling.

Introduction

Mr. Kurt Wilson is a married father of two, and a veteran teacher with over 2 decades of experience teaching elementary school students. Mr. Wilson has taught at his current school, Edger Allen Elementary, for 4 years. Edger Allen was constructed in 1926 and is located near what can be considered the downtown area of a mid-sized urban city in North Carolina. According to a recent facility assessment completed at the school, Edger Allen is one of the oldest school facilities in its school district. The 1926 building sits prominently at the front of the campus, even as it nestles behind large mature trees located throughout the front yard. The sidewalk from the street to the steps of the school's front entrance is divided by a plush and colorful vegetative median, and almost completely shaded from the sun by a canopy of leaves from towering trees that adorn both sides.

In coordinating our work schedules, Mr. Wilson and I agreed that interviewing in the morning, before the start of school, would work best for us both. Upon arriving at the school, I texted Mr. Wilson to let him know that I was on campus and headed inside to see him. Though not much appeared to have been done to update the façade of the aged two-story building, one of the first things I noticed as I approached the front door was an

upgrade in security features, such as camera phones and security vestibules. After being buzzed into the office, I sat and waited for Mr. Wilson to greet me and take me to an area where we could begin our interview.

Just moments after I had sat down, Mr. Wilson came into the front office. He was dressed exactly how I would imagine a physical education teacher to dress and how physical education teachers dressed when I was in elementary school. It was a little chilly outside that morning but not that cool in the building, so Mr. Wilson was wearing a t-shirt, jogging pants, and sneakers. I would later discover that, like many other schools as old as Edger Allen, its gym had heat and fans in the ceiling to circulate air but not air conditioning.

Once Mr. Wilson checked his mail and clocked in, he told me to follow him, and we were off to begin our interview. As we walked through the brightly lit halls of Edger Allen, I was amazed at the colorful artwork that seemed to cover the entire interior of the building from floor to ceiling. I thought to myself that it was like I had just stepped into Sesame Street. We walked through the auditorium, down a set of stairs, and into a gym that reminded me of the recreational center back home. The wooden floors were shining, and I could tell that they had been well maintained. There were cones and balls throughout the gym, organized in what looked like stations.

We made our way to a small room in the back of the gym that was Mr. Wilson's office, as well as additional equipment storage. Mr. Wilson offered me the only chair in the room while he sat on a yoga ball in front of his desk. After we both settled in, we began the interview with Mr. Wilson telling me the story of his life.

Kurt Wilson was born in 1973 in Rockville, Illinois, about 3 hours West of Chicago, and is the youngest of five children. Though Mr. Wilson's parents, mother Marla and father Levail lived in Rockville at the time of his birth, they met in Mississippi, growing up in neighboring counties. Levail had been married once before and had two sons by his previous wife when he reconnected with Marla, who also had a son at the time. Soon after Levail and Marla married and moved to Rockville, they had Mr. Wilson's sister and then him just one year later. Mr. Wilson said that his brothers, who did not live at home with him, lived in the same community where he grew up, so they all did "a lot of the same things together," including attending the same schools.

Mr. Wilson grew up in the same community from the time he was born until the time he graduated from high school. Even though Mr. Wilson's family was living in the Midwest, he says, "I was raised with southern roots" in a "big, small-town atmosphere." Mr. Wilson describes his parents and other family members who had left Mississippi in order to find employment in higher-paying factory jobs.

> Very typical working class. They didn't have a cause beyond themselves, and their immediate needs, and their children. They didn't feel a sense of empowerment. They didn't feel a sense of upliftment for others. You go home and close your door. A lot of my cousins and other relatives have similar . . . stories that included limited education but the opportunity for high-paid work for that time.

Since I had never lived in the Midwest and was not alive in 1973, I researched Rockville, Illinois, to gain a better perspective of that area of the country during the time Mr. Wilson was describing. I did a simple Google search and came upon an article written in July of this year. The article read that before the farming crisis of the 1980s,

companies outsourcing and automating manufacturing jobs in the 1990s, and the Great Recession of 2008, Rockville was a booming "city busy with life," just as described by Mr. Wilson. During the time Mr. Wilson's father moved to Rockville in the 1960s, its population was at its highest, dating back to an 1850s census. U.S. Census data show that the state of Mississippi had the lowest median family income in the 1960s, whereas only five states had a higher median family income than Illinois during that same time. Mr. Wilson asserts that better economic opportunities led his family, and other African American families, to migrate from the South to the Midwest.

> Because of the opportunities for factory work, it was a dense population of African Americans who didn't need an education to get work. A lot of my family from Mississippi and so forth, that farming area, had moved up to take advantage of the jobs.

Before leaving Mississippi, Mr. Wilson's mother finished her culinary degree and began to teach culinary classes in Macon, Mississippi. Mr. Wilson told me that his mother only taught for 3 years before she relocated to Rockville with his father. Once in Rockville, Mr. Wilson says his mother "just took the job she could get," which was coordinating meals at a senior retirement home. Mr. Wilson says he knew his mother was a good cook, but there was not much attention or focus on what her job was outside of the home, even though he still remembers visiting her at her job.

> I will go to her work and she'd be in kitchen. She would help make sure they had breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And she'd come home and cook great for us. But that part of her that would have been teaching, working with young people, and all that, that stopped.

Contemplating his own 25-year career as an elementary teacher, Mr. Wilson believes his desire and ability to teach is a calling from God, revealed through an innate gift given to him via his mother.

> I guess at some level, it's innate. I can see she could have got along very well with the kids, her students; firm, but fair. She didn't talk about it . . . but, it was there. It was something that even though I didn't know it was there, it was there all along. It was there in the background. I just appreciate the fact that I've had the opportunity for the Lord to have his way. That's how I look at it.

As for Mr. Wilson's father Levail, he portrays him as the "Southern son of a sharecropper, uneducated, misogynistic."

> My father was very much the head of the house. That was a dogma of the house. Would I consider him a bigot towards women? No.

However, Mr. Wilson says, "from a Christian perspective, the man is the head of household, the man is the head of the wife," and that his mother and father ascribed to that principle, and he and his siblings were reared biblically. Mr. Wilson went on to say that adopting a biblical principle of men being the head of household "wasn't a hard sale for Black men to buy into." He said, "it was something convenient. It sort of fed ego."

From my conversations with Mr. Wilson, it became apparent that Christianity, and more specifically, God, plays a tremendous role in how he views the world, as well as his life experiences. When we met for our first interview, I noticed Mr. Wilson was wearing a rubber bracelet with the inscription Matthew 19:26. I knew the caption on the bracelet represented a book, chapter, and verse from the Bible, but I did not know right off what the verse said. I assumed since Mr. Wilson was wearing the bracelet that it, and

the engraving, must hold some sentiment or value to him, so I quickly jotted it down in my notes to look up later. When I finally got around to looking up the Bible verse, it read, "But Jesus looked at them and said to them, 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'" Certainly, I could have, and probably should have, asked Mr. Wilson what the scripture read and why it may have been important to him. Although I did not ask him directly, I would later learn its significance across the life experiences he shared with me.

Mr. Wilson told me that he "went to church because that's what you did . . . it was a habit of Southerners." Mr. Wilson credits going to church as integral in his upbringing and why he has "a good compass" of who he is today. Mr. Wilson said he "was raised by being seen and not heard," which took me back to my own childhood, when I would often hear adults in my family say, "children should be seen and not heard." In my home, it meant that children should not interject themselves in adult conversations but be obedient and not question what adults tell them to do. Mr. Wilson's understanding is quite similar to mine, and he says of this parenting philosophy, "it was a good style short-term to raise someone; long-term, not so."

> Culture, that's a part of how we're educated. A lot of us of color . . . we were told we needed to be seen and not heard. A lot of that was for survival. You may not make it if you're heard. Being heard is almost being offensive. Speaking out . . . you're saying you don't trust us. You're saying you don't believe in what we're doing. How dare somebody question us? Some of us had to be raised to understand that you may not live to see the next day if you speak up. If you say something, your family might get their house burned down.

However, Mr. Wilson feels about his father and mother's parenting styles, he felt loved by them, and he is thankful to God for keeping a watchful eye over his family. He recognizes that his parents grew up in the South during a time when speaking out of turn may lead to your demise, and they wanted to shield their children from that fate in the only way they knew how.

A family that Mr. Wilson describes as a "very typical Black working class," who valued education, and let it be known to their children that it was important, even if it was not the "specialty" of the parents. Mr. Wilson says that having "high morals" being "hard-working" with a "strong work ethic" and "discipline," centered around his father as head of the household was how parenting was administered in his home. Mr. Wilson elaborated more on how his parent's parenting still influences him to this day.

> Based on how I was raised, I wouldn't think of myself as trying to be a friend of my kids. That absolutely did not happen in my house. Me and my mother get along great and we are just so connected that way. My father, is a matter of fact, "What was the score on the game? Who won? What did they do?" But it wasn't . . . avuncular. It didn't go there. I grew up in a house where daddy had to be big. I think my relationship with my father has stayed. It's been where it's going to be, unfortunately. But with my mother, it was always good. It's as if there's no limit to it . . . . as I got older . . . it's always continued to flourish.

Mr. Wilson says the relationship he has with his own children has continued to grow positively. He admits that at times his teenage children "can be short with me," and that he "might want more details . . . more information," but that it is his wife who has no "problem getting the whole story . . . all the details," which Mr. Wilson says is how his mother was. Mr. Wilson feels overall he has "a better relationship and understanding" with them now that they are older.

Mr. Wilson views having a healthy relationship with his teenage children especially important as his daughter prepares to graduate from high school and go to college. He believes he is the man he is today because of his experiences growing up in Rockville, Illinois, from what he learned while attending Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and from his 25-year career as an elementary teacher. Mr. Wilson shared advice he had given his daughter about selecting a college and major, which he says his own life experiences influenced.

> My daughter, she's a senior . . . in her junior year, she was going through her college decisions and things. I was like . . . look, you got to look at the school that has a major you want to study and then make your decisions." I said, "Look, don't be like me. I just ended up where I am through the grace of the Lord." I said, "You make informed decisions. You're going to look at the schools now, see what majors they offer, and then make decisions like that." And then I stopped myself. And I was like, "You know what?" God can turn it for good. I had a gap there, who I was going to be and what I was going to become. I may have not known the complete answer, but the Lord knew what the answer was for me. I said, "I see now more than anything that education for me was my calling."

K–12 Experience as a Student: "Teachers Were Absolutely Revered. It Was No Doubt About It"

Mr. Wilson's K-12 experience was all about discipline. He told me that his uncle once said, "if you send a monkey to school, they're going to send a monkey home." Mr. Wilson says he did not understand what his uncle's metaphor meant when he was a child, but as an adult, he does. Mr. Wilson and his siblings were expected to behave and treat teachers at school with the same reverence they did at home with their parents because in the time and area he grew up, "teachers were absolutely revered. It was no doubt about it."

> My father sent us to school as blank slates, as robots in a way of we were going to be there, we were going to behave. It wasn't about what you were going to learn, it was about . . . you were disciplined. You were going to control yourself. You were going to be able to take orders. You were going to be able to do what was asked, and that was very important in the time that he grew up. We grew up in a time where there was still corporal punishment, and the teachers and administrators had paddles . . . we were a different generation.

Mr. Wilson said that he had classmates who would get paddled often in elementary school, so he does not believe corporal punishment was an effective means to correct their behavior. However, corporal punishment did deter Mr. Wilson from continuing poor behavior at school, as evidenced by the story he shared with me about an experience he had in kindergarten.

> I was a kindergartener when I saw a young boy named Ricky during our carpet time seemed to be having a very good time rolling around on the carpet when the teacher appeared to not be watching or looking. After two or three rounds of his playing on the carpet, he had enticed me enough to join in and so, I decided I would try it. I felt the teacher wasn't watching the next time we rolled across the carpet during naptime. Well, the teacher was aware and was watching. I think she realized she had enough now that Ricky had enticed me to join in. Well, it wasn't long before she had that paddle and that was that—the paddle on your behind. She then looked at me and said, "Now, do you want me to tell your father that you're not behaving?" At that point, I had made my mind up that I was going to behave at all cost.

Mr. Wilson says that the fear of receiving a paddling at school and home once his parents were notified is what governed his behavior at school. He says the "need to do the right thing" was always in his consciousness. He describes how he felt as "the Darwinism of fear."

Mr. Wilson depicts the elementary school he attended as a child as racially "homogenous" "largely at-risk, high . . . low socioeconomic" where "teaching to the

middle meant" teachers "kept everyone behaving . . . everyone in line." The overwhelming majority of the students were students of color, while most of the teaching staff were White. Mr. Wilson says he did his part to maintain the status quo of the teacher to student relationship at his school by being "a well-behaved individual . . . seen and not heard," and always doing his work.

> I fit that build. I'll behave and I don't get in trouble. It wasn't about how many spelling tests I passed. It was just that's what you're supposed to do . . . don't have any trouble at school. In the schools I grew up where you better be seen and not heard. You didn't dare ask a teacher, "why are we reading this book?" That was considered rude. That was considered offensive.

Although Mr. Wilson felt his family believed discipline was more important than academics at school, he says he did well in subjects like math, despite not being considered a "high-flying student." While in elementary school, Mr. Wilson says he completed his assignments to the best of his abilities but was "taught to the middle" at school and "didn't get any extra support at home." Mr. Wilson says he remembers students being identified as academically gifted, but he was not in that group.

> There were a few kids who were more gifted in elementary school that I remember from the neighborhood that were in that track. They were able to show more abilities in elementary school, and they were separated.

Mr. Wilson sees the identification and separation of students at such an early age creates an opportunity gap for some students and is dismayed to witness the practice continuing to be thrust upon elementary students today, as it was upon him back then.

> What we have a tendency to . . . take the cream and we decide that they're the best. This kid is doing real math every night for homework. He's getting more opportunities. Now sure, he's better, but is it because of anything innate or is it because you've just given him the opportunities and you've discriminated? You've held this one back? I think it's a lot to do with opportunities. When I got more opportunities, I was able to surprisingly see that I was able to do as well as these other peers that were seemingly on this higher track the whole time. In reverse it works well, too. A lot of times, if you knight someone that they are gifted, and they may not really be . . . they may not be any more than an average student. That still happens. That's just at this grassroots issue of Americana and how we do things. It's very inbred in us to go, "Oh, this one's better." They're more productive or they're more efficient. You have a tendency to give them more opportunities.

Still, Mr. Wilson recalls the teacher who allowed him to try something new, and he has not forgotten that day in all these years. He says when he was in the first grade, he had a teacher who was "not very memorable," other than she may have also taught one of his siblings. Mr. Wilson told me that he had "no real relationship" with the teacher and that as a student, he did not necessarily feel loved. He remembers her as just doing her job, saying, "she read to us or did whatever the curriculum was saying to do, but nothing beyond that."

However, what his first-grade teacher did do was accept an invitation for his class to join the neighboring first-grade class for a Thanksgiving celebration. Though he cannot recollect what his first-grade teacher's name was, he clearly remembers Ms. Biden as the teacher who invited him to her class one day and allowed him to learn something new.

> It was Thanksgiving just like similar to this time of year, and I remember my teacher then said, "Oh, we've been invited across the hall to Ms. Biden's [phonetic] room. She had prepared these types of foods for a little dinner, and I remember venison. I have had venison once in my life, only once. I was in first

> grade, I was in Ms. Biden's room, and I can see how excited she was, how meaningful this was for her. I said, "What's that?" They said, "It's deer's meat." I can still see the venison. I can see it, and I just still almost remember what it tasted like. That will be something that I would equate with exposure. I probably went home and said something to my mother because my mother was in food service prep. That was her thing. She probably kind of frowned on it, or probably threw a little shade, "You all eating deer's meat." You know, kind of boo in her cultural context, but I have never forgotten it.

Mr. Wilson says Ms. Biden has since passed away, but the one hour he spent trying something new because of her has remained with him all his life. He told me that because of his time with Ms. Biden, he has been able to try different foods and be open to other life experiences, without feeling "like it was something that was not for me." Mr. Wilson views Ms. Biden as a teacher that all teachers should aspire to become. A teacher who invites learning to occur through sharing knowledge and a willingness to explore. Mr. Wilson said his first-grade teacher definitely was not an exemplary educator saying he spent the whole year with her and cannot remember her name.

Other teachers Mr. Wilson remembers by name from elementary school are Mr. Birkhead and Dr. Chancearrolls. He attributes being able to remember Mr. Birkhead and Dr. Chancearrolls, both White males, partly because his older siblings were also their students. Mr. Wilson describes being in Mr. Birkhead's and Dr. Chancearrolls's classrooms as "part of the process of going through elementary school." Mr. Wilson told me that Mr. Birkhead and Dr. Chancearrolls knew his whole family and that he and his brothers and sisters knew to show them respect when they were at school. Mr. Wilson claims to have never had any issues with Mr. Birkhead and Dr. Chancearrolls, even

recalling Dr. Chancearrolls as having “likeable personality.” Still, Mr. Wilson says that he “can’t think of anything that goes beyond” their amiable personalities.

However, there were three African American teachers at Mr. Wilson’s elementary school, two of which he purports to have given him social-emotional and cultural development. There was Ms. Jones, Mr. Wilson’s fourth-grade teacher, Mr. LaBands, his sixth-grade teacher, and Mr. Albatross, his physical education teacher. While contemporary understanding by some of elementary grade-level configuration is pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through fifth grade, where Mr. Wilson went to school, the arrangement was kindergarten through sixth grade. Mr. Wilson thinks “economics” was the reason his elementary school extended to sixth grade, but says he is grateful because he felt “much more prepared . . . much more equipped” for seventh grade than he might have been otherwise.

As a sixth-grade student, Mr. Wilson’s day was structured more like what I sense a K-5 elementary student would experience, more so than my understanding of the typical day of a sixth-grader. In my own experience in the sixth grade at a six through eight middle school, and in the experience of my son who attends a six through 12th-grade magnet school, we both would change classes throughout the day and were not assigned to one teacher’s classroom all day like when we were in elementary school. Having worked in two school districts over the past 20 years, I know that in some elementary schools with traditional kindergarten through fifth-grade configurations, sometimes third through fifth grade may change classes. What is interesting about Mr. Wilson’s experience is that he stayed with his sixth-grade teacher, Mr. LaBands, all day.

In fact, Mr. Wilson describes being with Mr. LaBands' all day as "huge." He explained, "Our school was K-6, so I spent all day with Mr. LaBands. It was recess. It was lunch. It was the whole nine yards."

Mr. Albatross was Mr. Wilson's physical education teacher in elementary school and was an African American male. He refers to having an African American male physical education teacher that you maybe see once a week as "very common" practice in elementary schools, guessing "PE and male go together a little bit more." Mr. Wilson says that Mr. Albatross was "a former great athlete" who was "a high school assistant coach" with "traditional views that worshipped elite athletes." Mr. Wilson says that he liked Mr. Albatross, but that he did not feel a connection or "strong relationship" with him. Mr. Wilson went on to say that he remembers Mr. Albatross centering his focus on "separating athletic from non-athletic . . . because he couldn't see beyond athletic abilities," and that was likely the cause of his inability to connect with Mr. Albatross. Mr. Wilson had this to say while reflecting on his lack of relationship with Mr. Albatross: "The funny thing is I saw nothing wrong with it at the time. I've only discovered these feelings in retrospect."

Mr. Wilson was able to connect well with this fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Jones, who was an African American female. Mr. Wilson says that Ms. Jones "elevated" him "with her presence . . . her sophistication, the way she did everything." Mr. Wilson recalls learning about Medgar Evers' life and assassination in Ms. Jones's class and her wiping tears from her eyes as she read the book to the class. Before Ms. Johnson shared the biography of Medger Evers with Mr. Wilson, he had not had anyone from his family

discuss the lives and deaths of activists fighting for equal rights, even though both of his parents grew up in the South, and father being 14 years old and living just 20 miles from where Emmett Till was lynched. Mr. Wilson said family members like his father did not show emotion as Ms. Jones had done by crying in front of her students. Mr. Wilson says that though his family members "were too hardened . . . Ms. Jones was a strong lady, but she was loving, too." Mr. Wilson told me that Ms. Jones's strength through demonstrated love and compassion made a difference for him.

Mr. Wilson was back home in Rockville to attend his brother's funeral when he ran into Mr. LaBands and learned about Ms. Jones's whereabouts.

> "Mr. LaBands, as much as we loved you, I loved you." I said, "It was Ms. Jones in fourth grade." I looked at him and I said, "What happened to Ms. Jones." I said, "Whenever they ask me who was my favorite teacher, I will put her name down." He laughed, and he looked at me, and he said, "You know what? Ms. Jones won the lottery. She had retired. She had moved to Florida with her husband." I just was so elated because I couldn't think of a better person to win the lottery, enjoying their retirement. I can't imagine how she would be now, but my heart just lifted. I was just so elated, "Wow, she's lucky." I really was just enthralled by her presence.

Although Mr. Wilson claims Ms. Jones as his favorite teacher, Mr. LaBands likely had the most impact on Mr. Wilson during his time in elementary school. In addition to being strong like Ms. Jones, Mr. Wilson describes Mr. LaBands as "kind" and "friendly." Mr. Wilson says Mr. LaBands would laugh and joke around with him and his other classmates. He remembers Mr. LaBands having an "avuncular" way about him that allowed him to connect with his students, and for his students to be inclined to care for him. Mr. LaBands was certainly one of the "revered" teachers in Mr. Wilson's

community who seemingly could connect with students whom others believed were a lost cause.

> Years later where they saw a disproportionate number of African American males in the alternative school, the secondary school in the community . . . they couldn't keep administration. They couldn't keep teachers . . . program had just completely bottomed out, and it was like, "What's missing?" They finally realized that they had to go back to our sixth-grade teacher who had taught a lot of this target area in elementary school, who these kids, gang members, or drug dealers, or limited proficiency in reading and math, but they respected him. They actually had to send him back to an alternative school with these 19, 20, 18, 16-year-old. They were considered misfits, and they were like clay in his hand in the sense of at least valuing themselves enough to where the fighting will stop, and the name calling will stop, and the other type of bickering will stop. I don't even know if I remember Mr. LeBands ever using his paddle on us. I can't remember if he did. I know he may have talked about it. I know he may have mentioned it. I know he may have gotten on us, but . . . I just remember when he spoke, we listened. That was it.

Mr. Wilson considers himself fortunate to have had both Ms. Jones and Mr. LaBands as his teachers in elementary school. He believes that being with Mr. LaBands in his classroom for the majority of the day had a positive impact on his life, but feels that if he would have had an African American teacher like Mr. LaBands earlier on in elementary, the effect would have been even greater.

> It definitely made an impact because he was my teacher that whole entire day and it was a self-contained setting. He had that influence on all of us. I do think that some of those experiences earlier can be maybe even more impactful. I think I see it a little bit as a teacher and a coach now in terms of the filter that you develop over time. It depends on what experiences you are collecting up until that point. I can meet a kid who's 11 and almost be impenetrable, with an impenetrable filter, that takes a lot of time . . . they had developed a stockpile of maybe some negative experiences in the previous grades, or maybe where teachers didn't care as much. Whereas a five- or six-year-old, not quite as much, and willing to receive. The experience about Ms. Biden, why I can think about that so strongly, I'm sure there were other teachers who did a little project of some kind, but I was 6 at the time,

> and comparatively, I think that was probably the first experience I had where the teacher was like, "Hey, I want you guys to experience this." You do those things at the younger grades . . . but you don't see that stuff as much in upper grades.

What Mr. Wilson did see in the upper grades, was a change in how teachers viewed his intellect. Students of color primarily attended Mr. Wilson's elementary school. However, he says that "we grew up in a neighborhood, as you got older, the schools were more integrated," resulting in Mr. Wilson attending a junior high that was "predominantly White and . . . affluent." Yet, Mr. Wilson and other students of color continued to be assigned to classes "homogeneously." He says that everyone from his neighborhood elementary school was being tracked together at the junior high, and now without teachers like Ms. Jones and Mr. LaBands to protect them.

> Now, it wasn't Mr. LaBands. It was such and such . . . who didn't really connect with us. So, there was fighting. There was teachers demanding students be put out of class or being expelled, suspensions. I was seemingly still with my same mode of, "Okay, she's still the teacher, and this is what I'm supposed to be doing. I have work to do." So, I kept that mode of being disciplined. I can remember one time even to the point where there were kids being disruptive, being rude, and even hearing a teacher say, "Just shame of them. They are so pitiful. You're so lucky. You're not like them." She probably was so frustrated. She was unable to disguise her emotions, but she was just really saying, "They're useless. They're worthless. You're lucky."

If Mr. Wilson was lucky, his luck would continue during junior high school. Mr. Wilson said that it was a teacher in seventh grade who recognized he could complete higher-level work than he had been given up until that point. Mr. Wilson had tested into remedial classes and been put on a remedial track but said he had a teacher who believed he could do more, and that belief made a difference.

> One particular teacher . . . he was more connecting. I think he genuinely saw from a learning standpoint that, "Okay, you can do a little bit more." He was not African American, but I think he saw each student. In his classes, the African Americans that were there, he had the same expectation for them or he connected with them in a way that they respected the space. I was learning in this class. I wasn't just doing work. He advocated for me and I went from remediation block to what we call core. That was our advanced block.

When Mr. Wilson made the transition from remediation block to the advanced core block, the demographics of his classmates transitioned as well. He was no longer in homogenous classrooms comprised of students of color; he was now one of a few African American students in classrooms filled with predominantly White students throughout high school.

Experience as a College Student: "What I Needed Most Then, Probably 3 or 4 Years of a Very Unsterile Environment"

Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia was recommended to Mr. Wilson as a prestigious Historically Black College for him to attend, and his parents supported him attending school there, even though he "was also recruited at University of Illinois . . . which was one of the larger White universities there." Mr. Wilson said of the University of Illinois, "it was just where you went . . . if you had the boxes checked," and that he probably could have gone for free. Conversely, in his experience, acceptance to Morehouse was based on social and institutional capital—who and what you knew.

> The kids that I went to school with, their parent went to Morehouse. Their mom went to Spelman. They knew what high school courses to take. They knew to take an SAT prep at some point, not just winging it and feeling like you were smart, you're going to get the scores. They weren't raised with that ignorance. It's not a slap at my parents, it's just a relevancy thing where you have to know how to get the carrot . . . I wasn't in a position to know how to get that carrot.

Mr. Wilson believes his parents encouraged him to attend Morehouse, partly because of what he describes as "the misogynisticness of, 'this is the school for the Kings.'" However, Mr. Wilson was fascinated by the prospect of leaving the Midwest and returning to his family's Southern roots, saying, "Hey, Morehouse in Atlanta. It was somewhere I did want to go. I was motivated to know who I am." So off to Morehouse Mr. Wilson headed, selecting political science as his major, with a minor in sociology. At the time, Mr. Wilson thought it advisable to major in political science, since he was considering applying for law school after graduating with an undergraduate degree. However, before settling on becoming an attorney, Mr. Wilson also considered a career as an engineer, "because they make . . . money and I'm a good math student."

While reviewing the transcripts of my interviews with Mr. Wilson, I noticed that he did not specify what kind of engineer he wanted to be. I had majored in agricultural and biosystems engineering, as well as mechanical engineering when I was in college. I also had a roommate who majored in electrical engineering, and friends and classmates who were civil, architectural, industrial, and chemical engineering majors. Therefore, I knew there were several concentrations associated with engineering and was curious about which Mr. Wilson wanted to pursue. So, I texted Mr. Wilson and asked which engineering discipline he was considering. Mr. Wilson responded that he attended an engineering camp in high school, where he learned of the various branches of engineering, none of which stood out to him. Mr. Wilson says at the time he was deciding which major he would choose; he was naïve about engineering as an occupation, but felt they all were in some way "antisocial," which is not the kind of career he desired.

Ultimately, Mr. Wilson was bored by the technical aspects of engineering, and instead decided to shift his interest to law, thinking, "well, I do law; that's interesting." For Mr. Wilson, receiving his undergraduate degree meant being in a better position to "get a job."

> I wasn't going to go to undergrad as a teaching major. That just didn't seem like what you went to college to do: engineering, doctor, biology, all these other things. So, I was kind of in an ideal, "I'll go be a lawyer."

Listening to Mr. Wilson list what he felt were acceptable careers to pursue while in college, it took me back to when my father articulated to me the same list as acceptable careers for African American men in America. I can still hear my father's voice saying, "there are only three things a Black man can do and make money in America. A doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer, and in that order."

Mr. Wilson describes his experience at Morehouse as "modern."

> My experiences there were, I would say, modern. I can think about the stories of King being on a yard, and he stayed in this dorm, and so forth and so on. There was an astuteness that transcends, but then there was also a modernism that seemed to prevail everywhere in any institution.

When Mr. Wilson describes Morehouse as being modern, he says it means that the African American students at Morehouse were dealing with the same issues that African American students at other college campuses had to navigate. Mr. Wilson says there were students involved in illegal drug activity, robberies, and even sometimes homicide. Mr. Wilson tells the story of a classmate who became the victim of a robbery-homicide during their Thanksgiving break, when the classmate decided to stay in Atlanta, instead

of returning to his hometown of Cleveland. Mr. Wilson acknowledged that some college students use drugs like marijuana and crime surrounding illegal drug use can be found occurring on many campuses throughout the United States. However, when his classmate did not return to classes after the Thanksgiving break, Mr. Wilson realized that even the "Mecca of Black males," the university attended by the great Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was not immune to the ills of crime and the loss of young African American male life.

Mr. Wilson said that Morehouse was perceived "as this Mecca of Black male masculinity." He noted, "We have this ideal of . . . we're supposed to somehow take over the world and create this whole super monster of Martin Luther Kings . . . we're going to reclaim our Blackness and get our right place." Mr. Wilson says that though he thinks the expectations associated with being "a Morehouse Man" were "a little overboard," he understood the need for some to have African American men who could be looked to as righteous, upstanding leaders of their community. Mr. Wilson told me the university sought to give young African American men "a sense of empowerment, a sense of pride, a sense of leadership, identity." He said ideals like "upliftment . . . perseverance, and excellence" could be found at Morehouse "more strongly than you would find other places, and even more pronounced."

According to Mr. Wilson, Morehouse was known for producing African American men of great faith and spiritual connection to God, and he believes him being there and experiencing what he did "was within the will of God." Besides Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Morehouse is also the alma mater of Otis Moss, III, who is the

current pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, located in Chicago, Illinois. Mr. Wilson and Reverend Dr. Moss attended Morehouse at the same time, and Mr. Wilson remembers Reverend Dr. Moss as "sort of our campus leader." Mr. Wilson remembers someone saying to him, "I don't want to go to school there because it's too sterile." Mr. Wilson says he paused for a moment before asking himself, "Sterile? What context did they mean it?" He recalled, "As I thought about it again, I thought about that in terms of the control. I thought about it in terms of cleanliness."

But that was not Mr. Wilson's experience at Morehouse. To Mr. Wilson, Morehouse and his experiences there were "very modern . . . very unsterile . . . very real and relevant." He noted, "Through that experience, that was probably what I probably needed to learn or what I needed most then, probably three or four years of a very unsterile environment." It was at Morehouse where Mr. Wilson began to learn more about himself and his relationship with God, even though he was a long way from the knowledge and understanding of either that he has now.

> In this space, am I God-fearing? Am I God-serving? Am I really living? Have I really gotten here? Obviously because of his grace. I did not get the spiritual leadership at Morehouse that I probably could have. I didn't get the spiritual nurturing in my home. I didn't get the spiritual nurturing in the church I was brought up in.

Mr. Wilson believes his lack of "spiritual nurturing" up until this point in his life, left him vulnerable to influences from other religious practices. He recalls the book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* being very popular while he was at Morehouse, and that the "images of Blackness and strength, definitely played and . . . resonated" with him.

> I can remember doing a fast. I can remember what it would be considered to not eat pork or things like that. All of a sudden, I would get home and my mom would be like, "Boy, you don't want no porkchop?"

While Islam was new to Mr. Wilson, he says, "there were some people who I went to Morehouse with who were in that, that was old news."

Although Mr. Wilson did not feel connected to many of his professors at Morehouse, he was reminded of two whose classes began to shape his thinking about the world. First, there was Dr. Griffis, who taught a course on religion and prompted Mr. Wilson to consider what it was that governed his life. Mr. Wilson recalls one lesson in particular when Dr. Griffis stated, "Religion is one's ultimate concern, and that's what governs your life. Most people's ultimate concern is money . . . if your ultimate concern is money, that's what governs your life." Mr. Wilson can remember asking himself, "would I do anything for money? Who would I put above money?"

Another professor of Mr. Wilson's was Dr. Chance, who taught a socioeconomics class. Since sociology was Mr. Wilson's minor, he says he took many sociology classes. However, it was Dr. Chance's class that Mr. Wilson feels prepared him "for working within the community," which he says, "I felt I would be headed." Despite only being able to name two of his professors from Morehouse, Mr. Wilson said he would consider all of his professors good. He attributes why other professors did not have the same lasting impact as Dr. Griffis and Dr. Chance to them not having the time to "grab every student and put them under their wing." Mr. Wilson posits that there may be other Morehouse alum whose experience with professors differs from his own. Maybe they had

a connection with a number of their professors, but Mr. Wilson said, “that was not the case for me.”

Additionally, Mr. Wilson says that he could have done more to connect with his fellow classmates as well.

> I probably didn’t make that connect with someone who was going places. That didn’t really happen for me. I had some good friends that I was in class with, but . . . there wasn’t that brotherly sense of, “Hey, we’re going to bring you along. No one wrapped their arm around me and said, “Hey, I’m going to make sure you’re okay.” I didn’t get that. I had a good friend from White Plains, New York. He was well prepared for Morehouse, and well-prepared for his corporate life, and the things he’s doing now, where I wasn’t as prepared in that same sense. He had his hardships and his challenges, too, but he always had that supportive environment to help him along the way. You have to have people around you.

Mr. Wilson found support elsewhere to push him through trying times at Morehouse and in life. Mr. Wilson says he maintained his faith in God, and God provided him a way through his challenges. Mr. Wilson concedes that he probably did not pray as much as he should have back then, or always followed God’s plan for him to the letter but says God “still got me . . . where I need to be.” Even so, Mr. Wilson laments not having “people in place to feel that gap and . . . void.” He says had there been, “it might’ve made a difference” for him at Morehouse, but instead, he had to find his own way the hard way.

Mr. Wilson wanted more for other African American male youth and did not want them to have to learn about life the hard way as he had. Mr. Wilson told me that he came to Atlanta because he wanted opportunities—opportunities to better his life and the lives of others. But he was uncertain about exactly what it was that he should have been doing.

> I'm what I think of as an interurban, big, small town kid. I'm in Atlanta because I felt like I wanted to have opportunities. I'm in southwest Atlanta, one of the most challenging areas in the city . . . undergraduate student at Morehouse College. What should I be able to do?

Mr. Wilson ended up becoming a mentor at an elementary school there in Atlanta.

> I mentor on other side of campus. I walk through the projects to this elementary school. I come into the school, and I'm a kid. I'm 18, 19. I walk through the door, and the teacher's—it was a Black male teacher. His name was Mr. Solomon. He was an older gentleman. When that door opened, he looked at me. And I had not seen looks like that commonly, meaning he looked at me and he goes, "Yes. Take him. Take him. Take him. Take him. Go with him." It wasn't really a "Hello. How are you doing?" I mean, he was a nice guy, but on this particular day, I can really just see now looking back that he was like, "Listen, take these boys, talk to him. Do something with him. I'm done for right now."

Mr. Wilson remembers one particular mentee named Kelvin. He says that Kelvin and some of his friends came to his dorm room at Morehouse one day and knocked on the door. Mr. Wilson was shocked that a fourth grader could make it across a large city like Atlanta on his own. When Mr. Wilson asked Kelvin why he had traveled so far away from home to his dorm room, Mr. Wilson said Kelvin seemed puzzled by the question. Kelvin had come to Mr. Wilson's dorm room, because that is where Mr. Wilson was, and he wanted to see him. As flattering as it may have been to some, Mr. Wilson could not stop thinking about the dangers of such young children traversing the streets of Atlanta unsupervised. After all, being in the streets of Atlanta unsupervised is what claimed the life of his classmate, 10 years Kelvin's elder.

Mr. Wilson asked Kelvin, "where's your mom at?" even though he had already determined that this is "what young boys do that don't have a lot of involvement,

structure, support" at home. Mr. Wilson did not know what else to say or do at the time, because he says he was somewhat unsure of himself as a mentor. He did not feel that he had "really been truly mentored" when he was Kelvin's age, and so, Mr. Wilson did not believe he had the requisite knowledge to mentor Kelvin properly. Mr. Wilson notes that even his experiences with his favorite teacher, Mr. LaBands, whom he loved and revered, did not feel like mentoring to him.

> I didn't have that mentor. Even with the experience I had with Mr. LaBands, he was like that to all of us. My father spent a lot of time with me. I had an uncle who probably filled that role as I got to be a young adult. They taught me how to be kind, loving, taught me how to be strong but sincere.

As I read the transcripts from my interview with Mr. Wilson, I began thinking of the experiences Mr. Wilson says he had with his father and uncle, are experiences I would expect a mentee to have. Though he may not have experienced them when he was in fourth grade like Kelvin, they occurred, even if hidden in the darkest shadows of his mind when he needed them most in support of others. Nonetheless, Mr. Wilson could not evoke how his father, his uncle, or even Mr. LaBands would have handled working with Kelvin. He was unable to conjure what he thought were the right questions or utter what he believed to be the correct and inspiring words.

Instead, Mr. Wilson found himself feeling sorry for Kelvin and his own efficacy somewhat minimized.

> I was more or less, "Hey, this is a good kid. It's tough out here on the streets. Wow, what's going to happen to him?" I helped him when I can. I'm out here mentoring but . . . I can't help every kid in the city of Atlanta. This kid, he got dropped in my lap.

Mr. Wilson continued his studies at Morehouse, and at the start of his senior year, Teach for America approached him. Up until the point he was contacted by Teach for America, it had not occurred to Mr. Wilson that teaching was a career that he should consider. Mr. Wilson knew he wanted to help people and had even mentored at a local elementary school in Atlanta. Still, Mr. Wilson did not see himself of the same ilk of the teachers who were revered in his community, and whom he still loved and admired because of how they had touched his life as a youth. Here is what Mr. Wilson had to say about Teach for America, and the moment he first considered teaching as a career.

> They were a non-profit around the early 90s that targeted inner-city areas or really rural areas. They try to boost the percentage of African Americans. I think when I started . . . it was like 3.3% elementary Black males or teaching-wise, but I think particularly with elementary, that was the lowest. The idea was, "Oh, let's find some talented individuals who can be teaching corps like Peace Corps. They were like, "Okay, you can teach. If you want to go back to graduate school, you can." But I really didn't have my mind made up . . . it still didn't dawn on me. I guess I wasn't even thinking in those lines. There were some people who were like, "Hey, I want to be a teacher." I just didn't feel like I was even that skilled.

Mr. Wilson said that maybe teaching would be an attractive career to him if he could be a teacher like Mr. LaBands and Ms. Johnson. However, at that moment, he did not see himself reaching their level of excellence. Nonetheless, Mr. Wilson was interested in the possibilities to help people while furthering his own education. All the things Teach for America had said he would be able to do. Mr. Wilson's father encouraged him to take whichever job out of college that offered him the most money. However, Mr. Wilson learned through a college internship as a summer camp counselor that it was not money that inspired him; it was helping people, especially children.

> My dad said . . . "you can go do this; you can go do that. You can make more money." I was like, "I'm not sure about making more money." I said, "I'd much rather work and help kids, help people." That's what I did for my summers. I would do camp counseling, working with kids, talking with kids, guiding kids.

So, Mr. Wilson decided to take a leap of faith and apply to Teach for America. Mr. Wilson says that the selection process for Teach for America included a written application form, which they used to screen initial applicants, followed by a face-to-face interview. In the summer of 1995, Mr. Wilson began his career as a teacher.

Mr. Wilson's Teaching Experience: "I'm a Christian Educator Now, and Probably the Best Educator I've Ever Been"

Mr. Wilson believes he was recruited into the teaching profession by Teach for America because of his "Black maleness." He says, "they were looking for Black males and looking at schools like your Ivy League White schools . . . your Harvard, Morehouse." Mr. Wilson posits that Teach for America sought to strategically place African American males in schools where they could have a positive effect on the community through exceptional leadership. Mr. Wilson credits a well-placed flyer, and God once again intervening in his life, for bringing him together with Teach for America.

> I think I initially got a flyer on campus, and so, that was my connection to Teach for America for the first time. I was a senior, going into my senior year, and that's when it first clicked, that was the first time it entered my mind that this could possibly be an opportunity. You see different things, you see different opportunities, but that was God's work in it at that point. For some reason, I reacted to that. You know how you see dozens and dozens of flyers and you just see things, but something made me react to that. I knew education majors. I knew a couple teachers who had inspired me when I was younger. I knew my mother even is buried down in my psyche. I said, "Teaching." I said, "Maybe that's for me."

Mr. Wilson was a part of what he calls the "'95 corps," saying "it was still relatively fresh," having been established in 1990. He describes the directors who supervised him as the same "grassroots people" who were trying to get Teach for America moving. At the time Mr. Wilson joined Teach for America, he believes they had approximately 13 sites. A quick visit to the Teach for America website found that today they have 62,000 corps members and alumni, 2,500 school partners, and assert the organization has impacted millions of students. By the numbers reported on the Teach for America webpage, they have grown tremendously, and according to Mr. Wilson, "they still have a pretty strong message of educational equity that they live by."

Mr. Wilson began his training with Teach for America in Houston, Texas, the summer following his senior year. He says the summer "training institute" was an eight-week summer school program that Teach for America offered to staff schools in urban districts with teachers in training. Mr. Wilson and other corps members were given the curriculum the school wanted to be taught, and they did the teaching. After being assigned to an elementary school within the Houston Independent School district, Mr. Wilson was paired with "a clinical teacher," who he said would observe his lessons and offer feedback.

> I went into Houston Independent Schools and worked at an elementary school that summer, and it ran like a school except it was summer school. Of course, from the parent's standpoint, they were glad to have their kids getting extra reading and math over the summer. Then in our sense it was training. It was a training opportunity to see, "Hey, what's this going to be like?" Again, it's summertime, so is that probably the most excitable time for kids to be in school learning? Maybe, maybe not. But the thing was, it was a realistic sample. Still, I got a pretty realistic sense of what it was like . . . to teach and what that meant. That was an

> opportunity to where, "Okay, is this something you really want to go? Do you want to go to the next step?" That's what the whole purpose was.

Mr. Wilson says his training experience with Teach for America was "more graduate-level training." He believes Teach for America's trainings are "not as boxed-in" as traditional teacher training programs, consisting of rote coursework, testing and student teaching assignments. He recalled, "When I was a Teach for America person . . . they were changing how teachers were made. They were sort of revolutionizing it if you were not a traditional undergraduate person."

Mr. Wilson liked that he could graduate with his political science degree, and then be trained as a teacher in the field with Teach for America. Additionally, Mr. Wilson was happy that Teach for America took on the responsibility of pair him with a school for which he was the best fit. This was particularly attractive to Mr. Wilson, since many states had different education and licensure requirements for teachers, dependent upon subject and grade level taught.

> This was a national program and they tried to pair you for best fits. I was looking at being in a Southern placement, like somewhere like Louisiana. The requirements in Louisiana were a little different than maybe New York, or maybe North Carolina. So then, it was kind of determined, "Well, New York might be a better placement for you." I said, "Well, okay." I had a family member in New York, so I said, "Well, okay. I'll be placed there." Well, New York was . . . doing some hiring freezes and other things, and I was like, "Wait a minute, I can't be in a situation where they want to hold the paycheck. New York is New York, you know, this a Midwest kid. I'm not feeling New York. I loved my time up there, initially getting acclimated, but I still didn't feel like I was a true New Yorker. I mean, New Yorkers are New Yorkers and I was no New Yorker.

Since Mr. Wilson did not like his New York placement, Teach for America arranged for him to be placed in a school in North Carolina.

Ever since Mr. Wilson's experience in college as a camp counselor, he has been dedicated to helping children succeed, and he was grateful to Teach for America for allowing him to realize his "calling." However, he says there were others in his cohort, and possibly in other cohorts, who were "motivated" by how their affiliation with Teach for America could bolster their chances of being accepted into prestigious graduate and professional degree programs.

> They were going to do their . . . two years of training. Wow, I have these two years under my belt, I taught in Crenshaw, Los Angeles, South Los Angeles. Now, I'm going to apply to Harvard Law School. Now, I'm going to apply to Chicago Medical School.

Mr. Wilson told me the thought of being a part of Teach for America as a means to advance himself in a career other than teaching never crossed his mind. Still, he was able to finance some of his graduate coursework, as well as repay some of the money he borrowed for his undergraduate degree through funding he received from Teach for America. Even though he did not use his experience with Teach for America as a stepping stone like some of his former corps members, he describes his relationship with Teach for America as "a win-win," and that he would not trade the time he spent in the corps because of the long-term benefits he has realized over his career. Mr. Wilson told me, "I do believe that if it were not for Teach for America, I probably wouldn't be a teacher."

During the mid- to late-1990s, when Mr. Wilson began his teaching career, he remembers "the population of elementary school teachers of color was 3%" and he believes that he found easy employment as an elementary teacher because of the need for more male teachers of color. However, he is not sure why he felt initially drawn toward becoming an elementary teacher. Mr. Wilson says that he was initially offered full-time positions at a high school and an elementary school. However, he was convinced by his then mentor that he might not enjoy high school because it was not as "spirited" as elementary.

> I was offered high school and elementary. My first mentor was a female. She was a Black female . . . and she was very spirited and passionate. I think listening to her words and wanting to take advantage of this opportunity, she convinced me high school was not as spirited. They were not as passionate. I see that in my high school colleagues. I love high school. High school has value, but high school, even high school educators are more of a numbers game. Middle school is the in-between. They're a blend of high school and elementary school. Elementary is completely pedagogy and full of passion. You're going to typically find the best of your best teachers at the elementary level because they have that tendency to where they're using all of the bags of tricks.

The high school Mr. Wilson was considering told him he had the option of coaching a sport in addition to his teaching duties, which he says "sounded really great." However, it was elementary that said, "we'd love to have you. Kids will need to see you." Mr. Wilson tells me the elementary school's approach to recruitment "stuck on me," and he was immediately intrigued by the possibilities. Besides, Mr. Wilson believed his studies at a liberal arts college like Morehouse had prepared him "for that open outlook of elementary," meaning he had a "general good understanding" of language arts, math,

and science. Mr. Wilson says you do not have to be "the strongest at any one thing," but you should be "decent at all of them."

There were other considerations that others warned Mr. Wilson about while he contemplated deciding whether to become a high school or elementary school teacher.

> I do remember when I was first talked to, when I was first coming into North Carolina and they were like, "Well, yeah, we put you at a high school." Then they were like, "But . . . the problem that we know we can have is we hire an undergraduate who is 22 years old, and now you got high school students who are 18. Some of them might be 19. Some of them 15 and look 19.

Mr. Wilson says that he was never "worried about" or "fearful of" the possibility of being accused of having an inappropriate relationship with a student. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the fear others may have of a young African American male who has been given control of teenage girls. Indeed, Mr. Wilson says "I probably would have been more careful had I volunteered to do girls basketball after school" than he was when he volunteered to be a boys basketball coach.

> Times would come up where the boys wouldn't have a ride home. And I'm calling the mom and she's like, "I can't get there. My car ain't fixed." This was like years ago. Whereas now the boss might tell you, "Don't put him in your car. Don't take him home." Well, I just had to take Tabitha . . . because mama said her car wasn't fixed. "No, I talked to her mama. Her mama said nothing wrong with their car." I'm like, no, I ain't dealing with that, because everybody ain't of sound mind and everybody don't believe in one creator and savior. I can get mixed up into some mess. Mama didn't raise no complete fool.

Mr. Wilson does not believe had he been a female teacher that the warnings about fraternizing with the students would not have been as overt if they were articulated at all.

> The level of trust is a lot higher. The impression was it was a double standard. A 22-year-old female, it wasn't this perception. I guess men were sex crazy or something. And so, if they were in a school, then there's the problem. But you had a hallway full of 22, 23-year-old females and it wasn't the same perception. There's not that same perception for male and female. That would be something that was perceived at the upper levels.

At the elementary level, Mr. Wilson believes questioning why someone of his gender wanted to teach "was probably more homophobic." He says that people may have thought he was "a weirdo, or not as cool . . . lame . . . not manly." Mr. Wilson told me that sort of thinking is "unfortunate" and thinks "it comes with a cultural context," particularly within the African American community. Mr. Wilson says widespread, inaccurate negative stereotypes about African American men being promiscuous and hypersexual, have cast them as absentee fathers who are somehow less masculine if they "got married . . . had a family . . . take care of the kids, and . . . bringing home a paycheck." Mr. Wilson believes that some African American males may internalize other's warped view of them and see teaching in elementary schools as "I'm completely selling my masculinity . . . not being who I'm intended to be." Mr. Wilson questioned whether goals to recruit and increase the number of African American males into elementary education are shared by society, or do they conflict with the overwhelming perception of elementary teacher demographics being White, heterosexual women.

> Almost as if it's like we don't want this to happen. We don't want you to really get behind the idea of turning this thing around and making good of educating our kids. Let's just put this in a soup. The Black male is not supposed to want to really take care of kids. The Black male is not really supposed to be sensitive enough to maybe want to meet their needs. That might be a female quality . . . that's a little feminine. If you ingest enough of it, you'll say, "No, I don't want to be a teacher."

Thankfully, Mr. Wilson did not buy into the narrative that he was not the correct race and gender to become an elementary teacher, and in the fall of 1995, he walked into his fourth-grade classroom. The school was kindergarten through eighth grade, which Mr. Wilson liked because during his 4 years there, he was able to loop up from fourth to sixth grade with one of his cohorts. Mr. Wilson also liked that the school had athletic teams for middle school students since he was able to continue his passion for coaching.

> I still had a passion to do sports, even at the elementary. "You can help with our football program. You can help with our basketball program." So, that kind of helped soothe me a little bit. I did the basketball for the eighth grade. I did baseball. It was kind of a good marriage there.

Mr. Wilson was happy at his school and says that all he could think about was being the best teacher he could be. Yet, Mr. Wilson recalls his early years as an elementary teacher being a challenge. He says one particular year his class was comprised wholly of students of color, most of whom did not have a "male in the home." The experience made Mr. Wilson want to continue teaching even more.

> It was an enormous undertaking in terms of the impression that you were making. It's something that just spoke to me. I'm not sure why. It could have been . . . a real passion, but I know it spoke to me. That was something that I saw as important.

Though Mr. Wilson was beginning to hit his stride as an elementary teacher, he came upon an opportunity to further his own education, while transitioning out of the classroom and into school administration. Mr. Wilson says he began to feel comfortable in his role as a teacher and confident in his ability to propel his students towards success.

Now, he felt was the time for him to enroll in graduate school and increase his own knowledge.

> Once I did my initial teaching work and then it's like, "Yeah, you got this . . . go get some graduate work." I took some graduate level classes, got some master's under my belt, and then I did do an internship. I did do some administrative work. It was this opportunity, "Hey, come be an assistant principal. Come be an administrator." There was a path for me. I was really pushed.

Mr. Wilson said, "it was almost easier to just say" yes to becoming an administrator than no, "because of what seemed to be a need." Mr. Wilson believes he understands the educational system better because of the various vantage points he has been able to experience, and that all his lived experiences have made him a better teacher.

> I would always say that you understand an organization better the more parts you've worked in. Having been a teacher, having been an intern, having been an administrator in the building, obviously being a parent, being a child, being a student . . . why I kind of understand a lot of these different pieces, that is valuable. It was valuable for me as a teacher. I think now I'm probably the better teacher because of my school experiences. I think it shaped me because it made me more who I am and more understanding of the other parts that are involved in schools. An administrator, is that something that I think was completely my calling? No. However, like all experiences, they can be for good, and I'm thankful for them.

After completing a one-year internship at middle school, and an assistant principalship at a high school four years, Mr. Wilson realized school administration was not his "calling" and went back to teaching elementary school, where he has been for the past 15 years.

> I sort of decided with some of my graduate work to take some classes that would . . . I think that I feel a little bit more passionate about, big picture. I think that had more to do with being at an elementary school exclusively. I think I did miss the aspects a little bit. I think I did miss that camaraderie.

When Mr. Wilson returned to the classroom to teach elementary students, he saw it as "a good opportunity to start off in a new system," in a large urban city in the South. However, he says his wife "wasn't feeling" the city he had chosen because "she liked what she had going on" in the city in which they were living. Mr. Wilson says that he understood where his wife was coming from, and as a family, they made the decision that he would look for a position in another district, one that would not require his family to pick up and move. Fortunately, an opportunity became available in a district close enough for Mr. Wilson to commute, while he and his wife figure out a longer-term solution.

Mr. Wilson told me he felt he had picked up where he left off when he returned to the elementary classroom. He says, "I was right back in that same situation I was in." Meaning he was an African American male, teaching elementary students who were predominantly students of color and whose families' incomes were low. Mr. Wilson recalls the school was a magnet school, and although its families' incomes were low, they were not as low as the families from the school at which he taught before he became an administrator. While Mr. Wilson's early perception of his new school reminded him of his old elementary school, he was advised by a colleague to not rely solely on his past experience, but to delve deeper into understanding his new school's culture.

> One of the things a colleague said to me was, "Whenever you work in schools, always remember that every school is different. Every school is still a unique family or unique feeling. There are going to be some things that are the same. There are going to be some things that are different. Like anywhere else, you got to get the culture, people want to get to know you, people want to test you."

A year had passed, and Mr. Wilson, taking the advice of his colleague to learn about his schools' families and sharing himself with them, found he enjoyed working at the magnet elementary school. Still, when it came time to renew Mr. Wilson's contract, he and his wife decided that finding a position in a district located where they lived, was what was best for their family. Mr. Wilson tells me he felt obligated to find a position that did not require his wife to move, because she had already moved once in support of his career.

As it would have it, fortune once again found Mr. Wilson when a teaching position became open in the same city he and his family were living. He said when he was contacted about the opportunity, he was informed that the school he was being recommended for was "a challenging school," and they were hoping he could help them make the necessary changes to move the school forward.

> It was almost like . . . starting back over. I was going back into a school that was in great need, that had great challenges. But now, I was this administrator who had some experience. It was an opportunity.

Today, Mr. Wilson is at Edger Allen Elementary, which he depicts as "a little more working-class and diverse," and sets it in stark contrast with the demographics of the elementary schools at which he previously taught. Mr. Wilson says he is thankful that Edger Allen is more diverse because he had grown weary of others' perceptions of his teaching students of color becoming synonymous with teaching at low-performing schools derived from families with low socioeconomic status and apathetic views about education. Mr. Wilson wanted his students and families to know he was there to support

and work with them as a team to ensure they were educated, regardless of their previous experiences with public education.

> I don't want to see color like that. I want to see that we all have needs, and can we get our needs met. I want students to realize that education is a process . . . this is the dialogue or the education that you want to have with students. I'm like your mom and your daddy. I'm really saying, "Hey, you're in this world. I'm here to help you. I'm here to support you. If you see something wrong in what I'm doing, let me know. Any question you have isn't a bad question. You're as much a part of the solution as I am.

In Mr. Wilson's class, children are seen and heard. He is constantly asking how he can break through barriers, and have his students become active participants in the "process of educating," as opposed to being a blank slate and taking whatever comes your way," as he had done when he was a child. Mr. Wilson says that not all teachers share his vision of what engaging students academically looks like, saying, "sit down, behave . . . can be very gratifying to a lot of educators." Mr. Wilson is appalled by teachers who allow students to sleep in their class because when they are awake they exhibit "behavioral problems."

> As a teacher, we are a resource. I think you have to understand that your job isn't just to be there and give them information. Your job is to support them in their world. That's one shift that I've been able to make in the recent years. I'm not so much about you sitting there being quiet. I'm much more about you understanding what the process is and how you can get the most out of it by being engaged. Being engaged sometimes might be just telling me what's on your mind.

Over the past 25 years, Mr. Wilson has spent more than a decade teaching fourth and fifth grade. He says early on in his career, when he was teaching at schools that consisted primarily of students of color, "there was a level of excitement . . . of surprise"

when people learned there would be an African American male teaching at the school. Mr. Wilson thinks that typically "elementary and male don't go together," particularly in core classrooms, but found his experiences to have been "generally positive." He says when "there was some skepticism," it was from "male chauvinist views" of teaching elementary students as work meant for women.

A couple of years ago, Mr. Wilson was asked to take a new position at Edger Allen Elementary. He shared with me the events that led to the change, as well as what it was like to adjust.

> We had a PE teacher . . . he did that maybe for a year or two. A former professional football player. He was like 6'5", like 315. He was like a refrigerator. Nice guy. His claim to fame was that he had stripped Steve Young on Monday Night Football. He would come in now again and talk about his weekend . . . "Man, these women out here now" . . . You knew that he had some money, so he had a lot of woman drama. Dealing with the elementary school, dealing with our kids, they didn't care how much money you had. They didn't care who you stripped on TV. It didn't mean a whole lot. They cared about how much you cared. I could see that he probably didn't feel like that was where he was going to find his mark. So, he just didn't come back. I want to say it was a Christmas break. Suddenly my principal goes, "Well, so and so didn't come back." She said, "But what do you think about being a PE teacher next year?" It was getting towards the end of the year. She had to use a sub, and she was like, "I got to fill this position, but what do you think about doing it?" Then that's when I was like, "Huh? And you know, because in my mind . . . I was elementary . . . I went in to do this. That doesn't seem to be the same thing because that's not what my mind was centered around. Of course, having this mentor, somebody who was seasoned, she was like, "No." She said, "This is how it works." She said, "This is my school. This is my building. I think that would be something that you could do well in." You would have to then take the training. You have to then pass a test. You would have to do these things, but this is something I want to ask you." I wish I said I prayed on it because I do that now. But at that time, I didn't have enough sense to know that. Whatever I did, the Lord saw to it that I got the message. So, I was like yeah. I said, I need to do this. So, I was like, yeah, I'll do it. On a personal level, why me? Because she wanted to bless me? I think she wanted to do something good for education . . . "You know what? I know I could get anybody with a PE degree, but they may not care about kids."

Mr. Wilson says he was "already investing in the recreation side" of Edger Allen overseeing its track club, which he viewed as a way to educate through exercise. Therefore, transitioning from fourth grade to PE was not going to be an untenable circumstance for him. Exercise and maintaining a healthy lifestyle is a part of Mr. Wilson's life outside of Edger Allen. So much so, our last interview was done in a small cut out area of one of the local YMCAs. When I arrived to meet Mr. Wilson, he had just completed a workout, and 2 and one-half hours later we finished our interview session, just for him to return to begin another workout. I found Mr. Wilson's commitment to his own physical fitness admirable, and his dedication to educating children, no matter the setting, even the more commendable.

Mr. Wilson told me he likes to keep Edger Allen's track club simple, saying, "we run." What is more, every time they run, Mr. Wilson uses that time to grow his students in some way. He says that wanting the best for your students is what being an educator is all about.

> To feel like you're so fast and you're better than everybody else? No. You need to maybe manage your time better. You need to maybe be a little bit more focused, do a little bit better in school. That whole big picture. As an educator from an elementary standpoint, I think caring about the kids and getting to that point where you want to try to get them everything of what they need . . . being a good person, as far as doing the right thing. Those are the type of things that I think we try to care about as a true believer and educator and wanting the best for the kids.

In order for Mr. Wilson to take over as Edger Allen's PE teacher, he had to take courses at the local university. After completing his coursework and passing the requisite exams, he said, "the next thing was, of course, I had to teach the PE class." Mr. Wilson

found that teaching his physical education class was completely different than when he was teaching in an elementary classroom. He says that people may have a perception of PE as tantamount to recess, but that it is not. Mr. Wilson believes many lessons can be taught through physical activities and sports. However, he asserts that there is more to educating through a sport than just rolling out the balls and watching students free play. Mr. Wilson tries to make a connection between the sport being played and educational and social-emotional outcomes.

> The relevancy of community and the simplicity of trying to help somebody. I think even from a PE standpoint, I think of it as playing basketball. Just give him a basketball. They'll be happy. But that's not necessarily all they need. That kid might need more discipline. That kid might need a little bit more sportsmanship. That kid might need to learn how to share a little bit more. That kid might need to learn how have a little bit more responsibility. It's up to you to try to teach those things . . . you're still there to teach them all. You have kids who might like basketball, you got some kids who don't like basketball or don't care about basketball, but you're there to teach them all. You can do those things through games. They're not going to receive a lot of those things from you if they don't feel you're there for them, or you don't care for them.

Mr. Wilson becoming the PE teacher at Edger Allen was interesting to me because of the relationship he had with his African American male PE teacher when he was in elementary. From Mr. Wilson's description of how he runs his PE classes, he has not modeled himself after Mr. Albatross, the former athlete with traditional views of physical education that places more emphasis on physical than academic prowess. Instead, I see Mr. Wilson aspiring to be the PE teacher he yearned to have as an elementary student—a teacher who sees every student and longs to connect with them.

The primary reason Mr. Wilson believes he is meant to connect with his students and support them in reaching their goals is that he was called by God to do this work. God has been at the precipice of major decisions Mr. Wilson has had to make throughout his life. Certainly, there have been times when he has jumped, sometimes he as tripped and fell accidentally over the cliff, but whatever the circumstance, he knows in his heart that it is a part of God's greater plan for him as an educator and as a person. Mr. Wilson understands this now more than ever.

> I've had more of a new awakening as an educator. I consider myself a Christian educator now, and I spent probably my first 21 years—thankfully still—but my first 21 years, I was an educator. I was a Christian and I was an educator. But I was not a Christian educator. I'm a Christian educator now, and probably the best educator I've ever been, and will always be the best parent I've ever been, the best co-worker I've ever been, the best citizen I've ever been, the best person I've ever been because I think I understand now that Christianity or being a Christian is not separate of any one thing or any one part of your life and who you are. I don't know what the total impact will be, but I do sort of believe now that had I not been...if he had not made that calling, if that had not been the calling for me under those circumstances, I don't know that I would have been a PE teacher right now on my own, serving the community in a way that I'm serving, working as a Christian educator network coordinator, and the way that I am now. Maybe education would have continued to still be a job for me, but you might be hearing a completely different story for me right now. You might be hearing a story that says, "Oh, it was a job. I had to pay the bills." But I can't tell you that. That first-year teacher out the gate or second year teacher out the gate, that's probably what he was headed for if he wouldn't have even been a statistic who just said, "Yeah, I taught for five years, and then I came to my senses." I have people . . . I may have taught with early on, that are maybe doing something else. Everybody has to do what they feel like they have to do, but that's not my experience. That's not my journey.

Over 15 years as an elementary teacher and 10 years as a school administrator, Mr. Wilson has spent the majority of his time working in schools serving mostly students of color. However, the teachers in those schools have not reflected the demographics of

the students they had been charged with educating. Even now, with Edger Allen having a more diverse student population, its teaching staff does not reflect the same amount of diversity. Still, Mr. Wilson feels the administrators at Edger Allen "do as good of a job as we can" to recruit males and teachers of color.

> We just hired a male of color who is a fourth-grade teacher from Virginia this year. He has some experience. He's been in a charter school, but he's probably new to the public schools from what I'm understanding, but he's not new to teaching. He's able to come in and do a good job.

In addition to the African American male fourth-grade teacher, a White male fifth-grade teacher also joined the staff of Edger Allen at the beginning of the school year. However, Mr. Wilson learned right before the Thanksgiving break that the White male teacher is leaving.

> He's decided to move on. So . . . I don't know how you look at it, but that's a significant turnover. That's one person who's already said no . . . that's huge right there. The African American male, of course, is still here. We're thankful and glad to have him. Again, that is the only other one.

As disappointed as Mr. Wilson and his colleagues are about one of the only three males leaving their school, Mr. Wilson is used to being the only one, or at the most one of two males, let alone African American males, when he has taught at elementary schools.

> I can think of my years going back from an elementary standpoint. I can think of years where, of course, I've been the only one. I've been the only male certified on staff. Before we hired the fourth-grade teacher, we had an art teacher who was of color who transferred. I was like, "Wow, somebody else." I worked with him a couple years. But there were no classroom teachers all of these years. All of the numbers that I've had in my experiences have been very supportive of that, to the point where I've been the only one.

Mr. Wilson thinks culture and social constructs of what it means to be male has a lot to do with a lack of African American elementary teachers. In particular, men should be able to earn enough income to provide for their families as heads of households. Mr. Wilson says there is a perception that men cannot support their families on an elementary teacher's salary.

> I've mentioned money here and there . . . but there probably is a bigger play on money. I'm sure people would probably say, "Okay, if teachers made on average $110,000, we wouldn't even be having this argument. Men would be teaching. End of story." Maybe that's true. Maybe the money is a bigger narrative than I'm really supporting now. If we go to Disney World . . . we got to get the small box of popcorn. They're seeing these perceptions too. Whereas they can see somebody else walk by, and they got a big box, and they're saying, "We had to conserve. They don't have to conserve." Someone else . . . either goes without a job . . . has no income . . . or you put a kid in day-care . . . but now, all of the money you did make is going to day-care. So, I still look at some of these cultural things of how far apart we can still be economically.

Mr. Wilson says the type of economic dynamics he gave examples of demonstrates that for some African American males, society is "telling us to not be as prepared to teach because teaching is not a choice." Moreover, he says socially assigned gender roles and occupations position male elementary teachers as "less masculine." According to Mr. Wilson, "there may even be some homophobia that says, as a male, you shouldn't want to work with kids," causing some African American males to use low pay as an excuse not to teach.

> It was almost as if, painting that impression that males, like men, don't even belong. I think that it's more than just the money side of it.

Even though Mr. Wilson is a veteran teacher with a quarter-century of experience in public K-12 education, he understands why there are some who ask, “why . . . teach if it don’t make money?” Even if it is sometimes used to veil less plausible and more insidious reasoning, such as African American males being somehow less cool, a homosexual, or weird.

Mr. Wilson believes this type of deficit thinking may someday lead African American male teachers to become “extinct . . . underemployed, underrepresented . . . in a large way” in elementary classrooms. He says teaching elementary students can become a relevant occupation for African American males, but they “need to see others doing it,” when they see him in the classroom “doing the right things.” Mr. Wilson says the only regret he has had over his 2 decades in public education is that his previous students do not have the benefit of the teacher he is today because of how much he has learned and developed as an educator.

> Sometimes, I think back to my former days and I’m like, “Oh man, you guys had me as a teacher back then. I feel bad for you.” Because I’m not who I am now. But that’s part of evolution. I see new teachers come in and you can chuckle and laugh. They’re not where they’re going to be eventually. I’m thankful that I was called in that way because I look at it as where I can bless my young people every day. They’re blessing me as much as I’m blessing them.

Mr. Wilson has begun sharing the knowledge he has accumulated over the years to a young African American male instructional assistant at Edger Allen Elementary. He says the instruction assistant “has a couple of kids he supports” at Edger Allen, and on the days he sees him, he takes that opportunity to “pull him aside” and talk with him.

> Every once in a while, he'd ask me a few questions and we'll talk. I start to kind of see . . . where he is now, or maybe what he can become, and what those different perceptions are because I know that he's starting somewhere and he's climbing. He's in the process of climbing that mountain.

Mr. Wilson says there is also a young African American teacher at Edger Allen who is also climbing a mountain, but that her mountain is different from the mountain the young African American male instructional assistant is climbing.

> She's amazing. Very good. But she's climbing almost a different mountain. She's almost already at the top of her mountain because it's like... Here's another outstanding female teacher. So, the welcome wagon is just already there. But when you start talking about the Black male side of it, it's like, "Are they going to prove to be another one? We're going to hold out. We're not going to endorse him just yet. They got to pay their dues. Are they really in this for the long haul?"

Mr. Wilson is clear to point out for me that "females . . . have kept . . . this train on the tracks for these years and they should be rewarded for it," but says the longevity of African American male elementary teachers is nowhere near that of female elementary teachers of any race. He explained, "You got these female teachers I can already guarantee, in 20 years, she's going to be teaching somebody's kids. That's what she does. You got someone who won't retire."

What is noteworthy is that Mr. Wilson is an elementary teacher who cannot see himself doing anything other than teaching elementary students, either. He told me he looks at himself and asks, "What else would I do?" Mr. Wilson says he cannot think of anything that would make him leave teaching elementary school. He feels that as long as he is able, then he is willing to get up and teach every day. Mr. Wilson used to think

about what life would have been like if he had chosen a different career, but says now, "this is who I am, this is what I do."

> I used to think it would be fun to maybe be . . . a VP of basketball operations or something with a mic and a horn . . . important job. I'm kind of so far removed from that. Like, that wouldn't move me now. I don't think that's what the Lord has brought me here to do. For me, being more foundational, in my roots, I just see the value in that every day, how can we make it better for the kids we're educating? I don't mean policy. I just mean that, am I making a big change that's making an impact long-run? Is it changing the world? I couldn't see changing, but I would like the idea of knowing that we can make it better by doing more of what's the right thing. I do think for me, it's much more spiritual. It's much more of a faith, of faithfulness that I would attribute my greater work to as far as getting people to see how that process can be most fulfilling, moving forward for other future teachers or others of color. Where I can be in the position that I'm in and I can encourage other people.

Mr. Wilson believes he is doing his part to encourage African American males to become elementary teachers but feels planting seeds of interest needs to occur while students are in elementary school, during the time they are beginning to consider what they want to be when they grow up. In his experience, he estimates only about 1% of the students he teaches ever articulate an interest in becoming a teacher of any kind. He says his students seemed to be more interested in emulating sports and entertainment celebrities, then pursuing a career they are directly impacted by and come in contact with nearly every day like teaching.

> You teach four classes of 25 kids each, and you might say, "Who's going to be a teacher?" You might get one sheepishly raise their hand, and you might find out that kid's mom was a teacher, or this kid's aunt was a teacher, and they got a good impression of teaching. I think you hear a lot about the sports heroes. They're still enamored about the entertainers. My heroes would probably still have been your sports heroes. They were in print. They were in books. They were on TV. Walter Payton, Tony Dorsett. That's who mattered. Sugar Ray Leonard, you know, these

> people were the people who were the heroes. They were who had some relevancy in your house, in your family. Not so much intellectually . . . but that was just the way . . . you began to draw value . . . not much different than my young people coming through now.

Mr. Wilson envisions large "societal changes" occurring before we can increase the number of African American males who teach elementary. Although money is not the determining factor for why he has taught in elementary for nearly 2 decades, Mr. Wilson suggests "economic improvements" or a raise in pay for the elementary teaching profession would likely help and not hurt the recruitment and retention of African American males to its ranks.

> They're trying to save money . . . they say, "There's no way I can stay in this profession if I don't change my income level." They may have to make a decision. There may have been some people who really love teaching who had to make this decision.

Additionally, Mr. Wilson says that we must continue to bring the societal benefits of African American males teaching in elementary schools to the forefront of their attention. He believes teaching in elementary schools can be an attractive option for African American males who talk about what they can do to level the playing field and create equality of their positionality in society. To do this, Mr. Wilson says they must "be more driven to give back to their community, to be more about the community, to be more of an advocate within their community, to be more uplifting in their community."

Lastly, Mr. Wilson posits that if more families are supportive of elementary education as an honorable career for African American males, then maybe more would choose to teach. He says that "based on some of their past experiences, based on

perceptions . . . they probably didn't even think to go in education, or they probably didn't think that would be a useful career path for them early on . . . they may have even been misinformed." Mr. Wilson said there was a time when teaching, like ministering or nursing, was the "hole" or niche careers for African Americans. According to Mr. Wilson, Historically Black Colleges and Universities tailored their major offerings so that they produced a workforce of African Americans who were good at what they did, thereby being able to command the kind of salaries that allowed them to make ends meet, and in some instances begin to build wealth.

Mr. Wilson continued by sharing something he learned while taking a graduate-level history of education course.

> The number one factor for determining the success of an individual . . . the achievement level . . . is who their parent is. The first teacher in the home are the parents. What can be the most important impact to breed more teachers or breed more teacher-preparedness? I guess you would have to talk about the family and talk about how parents are raising children within more of a pedagogical framework that would be . . . for education. You probably know people being generations of teachers. I don't think there was always a spirit of educating the family in a way that says, "Hey, this is how we pursue excellence. This is how we live in a way that is enriching to not only our lives but to the lives of others, more importantly, than just us."

As we began to finish our final interview sessions, I wanted to hear from Mr. Wilson what he believed he needed to improve upon as a teacher. He had stated earlier that he is glad that he had grown as a teacher over the past 25 years; still, I was curious to learn how he intended to continue growing as a professional. He told me fundraising, whether through the PTA, grants, or just asking the school administrator for more funding, was something he felt he needed to improve.

Like many other teachers across America, from time to time Mr. Wilson has to use his personal money to purchase materials for his classroom. He says he looks at his "little piggy bank," thinking, "Can I afford to splurge on this for my school?" A while back, Mr. Wilson received funding that allowed him to attend professional development training for physical education teachers. He says the school district was able to come up with the funding, "but without that grant, I wouldn't have gone." Mr. Wilson said he could appreciate the difficult financial decisions school districts are required to make to main their operations. However, at the same time, without proper funding, some student achievement may go unrealized.

> If you need some new equipment . . . that takes real money. You could do some great things with it, or you can do some great teaching with it. What if you didn't have it and you had to do without it? What's that negative impact? Funding is difficult. It's hard to accomplish. However, it has to be dealt with.

Summary

With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.

In conclusion, Mr. Wilson has practiced public K-12 education for 25 years, the majority of which has been spent in elementary classrooms. He was reared by loving parents in what he says was a very typical working-class home, where the male was the head of the household. At home and school, Mr. Wilson was expected to be seen and not heard. However, when Mr. Wilson left Rockville, Illinois, to attend Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, he began to find his voice, his passion for teaching young people, and God.

Mr. Wilson always knew he wanted to use his life to better the lives of others in whatever community in which he lived. What some might describe as serendipitous, Mr. Wilson says was divine intervention, when a flyer produced by Teach for America found its way in his consciousness. After a summer of training in Houston, Texas, Mr. Wilson would begin what has turned out to be an educational career lasting a quarter-century, 15 years of which have been spent teaching in elementary classrooms.

Fueled by passion and anchored in God's call over his life, Mr. Wilson continues to embrace new challenges, transitioning from teaching fourth and fifth grade to physical education for the past 2 years. Mr. Wilson persists as an elementary teacher, despite the obstacles he faces in the form of racism, genderism, and other socially constructed barriers that prevent many African American males from becoming elementary teachers. I am certain that the many student lives who Mr. Wilson has touched would agree, we are fortunate he continues to answer the call.

Mr. Wilson's Epilogue

Mr. Wilson offered the following thoughts on what participating in the study meant for him.

> When I was talking with you earlier, and through this process, it's kind of been therapeutic for me in a way. This was really reflective. I got to the point where I look forward to that last session or the next upcoming session. It gave me a lot to think about. What is there to offer education? What does it offer future educators? To think that, "Okay, you got an opportunity to share some of that" is rewarding. But I hope that my experience can be rewarding moving forward, or maybe there's something that will be helpful to the profession or important that we can take a little bit further. Hopefully, just the fact that people are still thinking about education, and how it can sort of uplift us and get us where we want to go is still important.

CHAPTER VII

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

I had the honor of interviewing three African American male elementary teachers who opened their lives to me so that I might share their experiences through portraits. Each participant willingly answered questions as we partnered to examine how their lived experiences shaped their decisions to become elementary teachers. Together through each participant's unique portrait, we were able to answer my two main research questions: Why African American males desire to teach elementary students? And, what are the lived experiences of African American male elementary teachers? We also considered what perceptions others have of African American male elementary teachers, how they create and maintain positive images of African American male elementary teachers, and what ways African American males are integral in educating elementary students.

I offered portraits of the three participants in Chapters IV, V, and VI. Chapter IV presents the portrait of Mr. D, a self-described beginning fourth-grade teacher with less than five years of teaching experience, but who has already received district and state level accolades for his exceptional work in the classroom. In Chapter V, the reader is introduced to Mr. Stacey, a former NFL hopeful turned fourth-grade elementary teacher with 17 years of experience in the classroom. The last portrait, found in Chapter VI, is of Mr. Wilson. Mr. Wilson has been in education for over 2 decades, spending over 15 years as a teacher in elementary classrooms. Each portrait is intended to represent the genuine

voices of the study participants. Italics are used to indicate each participant's words as they were spoken.

Though each participant partook in semi-structured interview sessions, the length of each interview session and the follow-up questions asked differed based upon answers given. As a result, the length of each portrait also differs. Nonetheless, I believe a level of trust was built between the participants and me, that allowed their portraits to be rich with data, regardless of the number of pages needed to present the findings. The portraits are arranged by years of teaching experience in ascending order. Each portrait begins with an introduction of the study participant, followed by their experiences as K-12 students, college students, and teachers in elementary schools. I conclude each portrait with a summary of why the participant says they teach in elementary schools.

In the pages that follow, I discuss three main themes that encapsulate what I learned from my study participants about why some African American males choose to teach in elementary schools and provide insight for recruiting and retaining more African American male elementary teachers. The main themes drawn from the three portraits are (a) Nontraditional pathways to elementary education, (b) Scholars vs. Scolders, and (c) Money is not everything, but it helps. Next, I discuss implications of my study for African American males who are researching career choices, universities offering elementary education preparatory programs, and school districts desiring to recruit more African American male educators to teach in elementary schools. Additionally, I share my thoughts on future research. I conclude by describing my personal reaction to the

study and my participants, given my identity as an African American man who is a school district leader.

Central Themes

Nontraditional Pathways to Elementary Education

Although they have been successful as elementary teachers, none of the participants came to the classroom via what some may consider the traditional route into the field of elementary education. They have different backgrounds as far as where they were reared, the schools the participants attended, and the career goals they had before becoming elementary teachers. As varied as the study participants' backgrounds may be, their passion for teaching elementary students is indistinguishable between the three.

The study participants chose careers in which both their race and gender are hyper-visible, subjecting them to a working environment where "gendered racism" (Hicks Tafari, 2018; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2014; Schwing et al., 2013) is ordinary. There are some careers, like teaching elementary students, that have been socially constructed in a manner that excludes certain people where their race and gender intersect. Even though each study participant said they were currently working or had worked in the past with at least one other African American male elementary teacher, the normal demographic of their teaching staff were White women. Like me, none of the participants found the phenomenon out of the ordinary. They knew before they decided to teach elementary students that teachers who shared their race and gender would not represent the majority demographic of their elementary school's teaching staff.

From my own experience as an elementary student, a father of elementary students, an employee of two school districts for almost two decades, and a review of literature, I was pessimistic about my ability to generate a sufficient participant pool within one school district. I was pleasantly surprised when I was able to secure the proposed number of study participants from the same school district, and in a relatively short time frame. I had convinced myself that I would have to solicit multiple school districts, just to have a pool large enough to glean three willing study participants. So, when I learned that the participants were currently working with other African American male teachers in their schools, I was encouraged. Nevertheless, when the participants are counted with the other African American male in their schools, they still represent less than five percent of the certified teaching staff.

I do not know the pathways the other African American male teachers in the participants' schools took in their journeys to become teachers, but I do wonder if they are what I consider to be as non-traditional and innovative as the study participants. Take, for instance, Mr. D. Mr. D is the only one of the three participants who says he always wanted to be a teacher, even if he had not yet settled on teaching in elementary upon entering college. Similar to Mr. Stacey, Mr. D struggled to pass the Praxis. In fact, many elementary educators have trouble passing the praxis the first time, not just African American males. According to a 2019 report by the National Council on Teacher Quality, only 46% of elementary teachers pass their content exam the first time (Putman & Walsh, 2019). The first-time pass rate of African Americans is even lower, at 38% (Putman & Walsh, 2019). Lawyers, engineers, and doctors, professions Mr. Wilson and I were told

are appropriate careers for African American men, all have first-time pass rates for their respective exams between 23 and 44% higher than elementary teachers (Putman & Walsh, 2019).

After Mr. D failed the Praxis, he and several of his classmates decided they would change their major from education to family consumer science, rather than sit again for the exam. Failing the Praxis was a setback, but it did not deter Mr. D from wanting to become a teacher. Instead, Mr. D thought of an innovative way to enter his university's teacher education program, without passing the praxis right away. Mr. D said,

> I knew once I graduate, I can get in teacher education program with a GPA of 2.5 and a have bachelor's degree without taking the Praxis. Eventually, I still had to take it, but I knew I can at least get in and start taking some of the classes. I figured it out. I was going to get in there one way or another.

When I learned of how Mr. D found his way into elementary education, I wondered how many other African American males had to also figure out nontraditional means to become elementary teachers. What is more, how many African American males forgo becoming elementary teachers because of the high failure rate of the Praxis? In just four years, Mr. D has already been selected as his district's Rookie Teacher of the Year, and state's PTA Teacher of the year. There are likely many other talented African American males who could be of benefit to all students in elementary classrooms, who may have chosen other career paths because of the Praxis or other aspects of traditional pathways into elementary education.

Unlike Mr. D, Mr. Stacey never wanted to be a teacher, so the Praxis did not set him on his nontraditional path to teaching elementary school. Mr. Stacey says he always

wanted to play in the NFL, and it was only after an injury ended his football career that he decided he would become an elementary teacher. After graduating from college, Mr. Stacey worked at a gym and coached high school football, as well as substitute teaching fifth-grade remedial math. Initially, substitute teaching was a short term means of income for Mr. Stacey, but the principal who hired him noticed he had a gift for working with young people.

Mr. Stacey says that he fought becoming a teacher, but eventually, being around the students and seeing his impact on them began to change his thinking. Mr. Stacey said, "I came in as a sub . . . When he talked about me being a teacher, I was like, "No, I can't do that." However, when Mr. Stacey started receiving his students' test data and working with a group of third through fifth-grade boys, his attitude toward teaching changed. He remarked, "This is my calling. This is where I need to be." Mr. D recommended for African American males who are unsure if elementary education is a career for them to substitute teach. Mr. D says that he tells his African American male friends "that one or two days when you're sitting in the classroom, that can really impact not only you but the kids."

In the case of Mr. Stacey, his principal used substitute teaching as an innovative means to recruit an effective African American male into teaching elementary school. Mr. Stacey also participated in Lateral Entry, which at the time was the entry pathway into the teaching professions. The Lateral Entry teaching licensure pathway has since been replaced by the Residency License in the state Mr. Stacey teaches. Both Lateral

Entry and Residency licenses are considered alternative licensure pathways into education.

The key point of the Lateral Entry and Residency license is that they allow candidates to teach while completing education and exam requirements necessary for licensure. The ability to be employed while earning a teaching certification can be beneficial to African American males who have obtained an undergraduate degree, but are unemployed, as well as to school districts having trouble filling teaching positions. Weller (2019) says,

> While college attainment helps all workers get more access to better paying, stable jobs with better benefits . . . Black workers, no matter their level of education, still face impediments in the labor market—employment discrimination, occupational segregation, and unequal pay. (p. 4)

There may exist an opportunity for school districts to capitalize on the failings of other industries to employ college-educated African American men in their elementary schools. Mr. Stacey is evidence that alternative pathways such as Lateral Entry or Residency License can introduce college-educated African American men to the profession of elementary education, while at the same time filling critical teaching positions with the diversity of race and gender.

Mr. Wilson says he was recruited by Teach for America, primarily because of their attempt to diversify America's teaching force. As discussed in Chapter II of this study, African American teachers have become "martyrs to integration" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 91), ever since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ousted 38,000 African American teachers from schools (Goldstein, 2015; Milner & Howard, 2004). Mr.

Wilson says that when Teach for America first approached him in the early 1990s, they were targeting “inner-city areas or rural areas” in an effort “to boost the percentage of African Americans” who were teachers. Mr. Wilson recalls the percentage of African American male teachers being 3.3% at that time, with elementary having the lowest number.

Mr. Wilson credits Teach for America for bringing the possibility of becoming a teacher to his attention. Mr. D also tried to become a teacher through the Teach for America organization, however, he was not successful in joining the teaching force through that route. Mr. D said when he was not selected as a candidate for Teach for America, it was the “first time I felt like I failed at something . . . that was one of the times I felt defeated.”

For Mr. Wilson, Teach for America was not a disappointment and was seen by him as early innovators in alternative teacher recruitment and training initiatives. He says that through Teach for America’s summer “training institute,” candidates had “a pretty realistic sense of what it was like . . . to teach” and determine if they want to “go to the next step.” In Mr. Wilson’s opinion, Teach for America was “changing how teachers were made . . . sort of revolutionizing” how non-education undergraduates were entering the teaching profession. From my conversation with Mr. Wilson, I found Teach for America to be a good example of how organizations outside of school districts and universities can also modernize teacher recruitment and retention.

Scholars v. Scolders

Partly due to their nontraditional pathways into elementary education and greatly due to their constant desire for self-improvement, each participant has earned multiple degrees. Yet, just as commonly as academic achievements in the study of education appeared across the three men's portraits, so too appeared stereotypical perceptions of them as disciplinarians and role models for troubled students, particularly male students of color. In differing degrees, each participant has embraced perceptions of themselves as "otherfathers" (Hicks Tafari, 2018, p. 9), disciplinarians, and what Mr. D calls "behavior specialists," even while questioning the veracity of this concept.

Scholars. Mr. D had a bachelor's degree in family consumer science, but before he could realize his dream of becoming a teacher, he had to return to school and earn a second degree in elementary education. For some, having to go back to school may have been a deterrent, but for Mr. D, he viewed it as an opportunity to improve himself and move closer to his goal of becoming a teacher. Mr. Stacey has an associate in arts degree, a bachelor's in kinesiology with a minor in biology, a master's degree in education and is certified to teach Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) students. Mr. Wilson earned a bachelor's in political science, master of education and school administration, elementary K-6 licensure, as well as health and PE K-12 licensure.

Mr. D and Mr. Stacey spoke about having to prove to some of their White parents that they had the educational credentials to teach their students. Mr. D said,

> you're a male, and you're a Black teacher, I think parents are harder on you. I think they trust a White teacher more with their child because that's what they're

> accustomed to seeing. When they see this change and this difference, it's like, "I need to question him."

Granted, when Mr. D first started teaching at Dream Ridge, it was during the middle of the year. I am a parent who would have probably had questions for Mr. D and school administration. However, Mr. D felt that had he been a White teacher, his place in the classroom would not have been questioned as aggressively. Mr. Stacey recalls how parents, who are often White, react during an open house when they first learn he will be their child's teacher. He said parents would ask him, "where'd you go to school at . . . are you certified?" After listing his degrees and certifications for his parents, Mr. Stacey says they usually settle down and are okay with him teaching their child.

What Mr. D said about parents trusting White teachers more, because that is what they are used to seeing, exemplifies how ordinary the marginalization of teachers of color is, especially for males at the elementary level. For the parents described by Mr. D and Mr. Stacey, it was somehow unnatural for African American men to possess the knowledge and have the authority to disseminate it to others. Imagine what parent reaction would be if the study participants did not have the many degrees and certifications they have earned.

The study participants are men who enjoy learning and constantly search for ways to improve their education, as well as the way they educate their students. Mr. D says that he always keeps people around him "who are continuously growing," so, in turn, their accomplishments will fuel his desire for growth. Mr. Stacey told me he desires to learn more about teaching students with special needs so that he can effectively serve all

students in his classroom. Mr. Wilson has only been teaching physical education for a year and a half, so he applied for a grant to attend a conference to learn more about the curriculum.

I found the participants to be dedicated to lifelong learning and becoming better teachers now. One of the ways Mr. D believes he can improve as a teacher is by having a better knowledge of the content he is teaching. He thinks that if he can effectively connect the curriculum he is given "to the real world," his students will benefit academically. What is more, Mr. D likes his instruction critiqued by his peers. In fact, he says he welcomes instructional observations by more experienced teachers throughout his district, even if he is severely nervous while being observed. Mr. D believes that the feedback he would receive from peer observations would improve him as a teacher, and more importantly, assist him in being a better teacher for his students.

Over the years, Mr. Stacey has noticed an increase in the number of students with special needs being assigned to his classroom. Mr. Stacey says that his lack of knowledge sometimes places a strain on his relationship with students with specials needs and their parents. Mr. Stacey shared how he has to be particularly mindful of his race and gender when dealing with the White mother of one of his students, for fear that their "conflict" will gravitate from how best to serve the student's academic needs, "to be that Black—White thing." Mr. Stacey could have easily thrown up his hands in frustration, but instead, he wants his district to offer training so that he can learn more about "the thinking process" of students with special needs and "the teaching process" he can implement that will aid in his students' academic success.

When Mr. Wilson was asked to move from his fourth-grade classroom to teach Edgar Allen's PE classes, after they were abandoned mid-year by the PE teacher, he viewed the request as an opportunity to grow his students as people. Mr. Wilson set out to change the perception of PE class from being just another recess, to teaching themes like, "the relevancy of community and the simplicity of trying to help somebody." I think Mr. Wilson's approach to learning reminds us that education is more than reading, math, and science. Learning should also involve social, emotional, and interpersonal relationship skills.

Mr. Wilson could have rejected the request by his principal to move from teaching fourth grade to teach PE. After all, Mr. Wilson had been in public education for over 2 decades, and with his credentials he could have easily moved to another school if he would not have been allowed to keep his position as the fourth-grade teacher at Edger Allen. Mr. Wilson could have also said to himself that he only has a few more years left to retirement, why not leave behind the pressures of end-of-grade testing, roll out some balls, and float on to retirement as a glorified instructor of recess. Mr. Wilson did neither of those things; instead, he went back to school to learn how to use physical education to better his students' life outcomes.

Scolders. Despite the participants' educational achievements, desire for continuing education and professional development, and focus on how their pedagogy affects their students' academic achievement, they are often perceived by others as more disciplinarian than academic specialists. Even as the participants offer examples of how they have been able to have a positive effect on their students' academic achievement, I

feel they also presented accounts that support the narrative of them being "otherfathers" and "behavior specialists."

Maybe being viewed as a disciplinarian is a perception that is hard for African American males to escape in elementary education because of both race and gender. Indeed, when the study participants spoke of giving back to the community through teaching, it was often via means other than academics. What is more, the participants sometimes conceded nurturing of students to their female colleagues, while adopting order and discipline as their contribution to student development.

Mr. D says that it "comes natural for a woman to nurture all the kids" and that if he had a male instead of a female cooperating teacher, he would have learned to be "firmer" with his students. Additionally, Mr. D posits his African Americans, chiefly single mothers, are happy when their children are in his class because of their "implicit bias" that "he knows my culture." Mr. D says, "They want someone like them in the classroom. They don't know they're thinking it, but it's like, 'He know the culture. He can relate more.'"

Mr. D believes that his ability to connect with African American students is not predicated solely on him being an African American male. He told me the assumption that he can relate to the circumstances of an African American male student being reared by a single mother would be misplaced, because he grew up in a home where both parents were present. Mr. D feels that he can restore order and positive behavior to students his female counterparts do not. Mr. D said that when female teachers "see Black males in the school, it's like, go to his room." Still, Mr. D says, "I love when they say,

‘Can I go to Mr. D’s class?’ I love having the opportunity to see someone upset, and then we are talking here by ourselves and see them eventually go from a 10 to a 1.”

For as much as Mr. D does not want to be considered a behavior specialist, you can tell he has a certain amount of pride associated with being perceived as able to manage poor student behavior. He says, “I can be a hard teacher and strict,” and sometimes he wonders if he is too hard on his students. However, he has found comfort in the words of one of his students who wrote, “He was as strict as Baby Bear’s porridge: just right.”

Mr. Stacey has had similar experiences of having students with academic and or behavior problems sent to his class. Not because of his pedagogical acumen, but because they believed the former football player would be able to tolerate and correct behavior, the White female teachers could not. Mr. Stacey claims that teachers who graduated from a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) left Due North Elementary School “because the demographics were changing” and they “were getting the kids” from a well-known affordable housing community.

Mr. Stacey’s principal at Due North encouraged him to work with boys across the school who were referred to him by other teachers. Another principal at Due North assigned Mr. Stacey students he describes as being “off the wall.” At one point, Mr. Stacey was worried about losing his pathway into teaching through Lateral Entry, but his mentor at the time told him not to worry because the students in his class, “teachers don’t even want them.”

Mr. Stacey thought that when he obtained his AIG certification that students with academic and behavior challenges would be more evenly distributed among the other teachers and him. His principal at the time had even confirmed that would be the case. However, after earning his AIG certification, Mr. Stacey was still being assigned an overwhelming majority of students having issues with behavior. Mr. Stacey said, "There was an intentional thing, and I learned early where the division was. 'You're a Black male. We know you can handle some of the behavior problems. So, this is what you're going to do.'"

Eventually, Mr. Stacey accepted that he would be assigned certain students, no matter how many degrees or certifications he received, because he was an African American male teaching in elementary school. He told me that he used to dress up for work so that he would set "a good appearance" for his students. Now he says he dresses more "casual" because he never knows when he will have to break up a fight, as he had done right before our interview, or chase a student down the road. What was really concerning to me is when he told me that he is sometimes called from his classroom during instructional time to break up a fight on the playground. Mr. Stacey explains,

> Every once in a while, just like today, there's some kids that I might have to restrain and I don't want to be tearing my clothes. I'll get a call, "Mr. Stacey, you need to go to the playground. We got a kid out there." I'll have to leave my classroom, somebody got to cover, and I have to go out there and find out what's going on. I'll go halfway down the street because a kid took off running. So, I try to be relaxed in what I wear.

Mr. Wilson also offered examples of how he is cast as the father figure disciplinarian, rather than an intellectual educator. Like Mr. D and Mr. Stacey, Mr.

Wilson also co-ops the role of disciplinarian, while at the same time bemoaning being viewed primarily in that way. Throughout his teaching career, Mr. Wilson tells me he has mostly been in schools where the student population was largely comprised of students of color, many of which he says did not have a "male in the home." Mr. Wilson describes teaching in schools predominantly consisting of students of color as "an enormous undertaking in terms of the impression" he was making, and that it was "something that just spoke" to him. He was not sure why it spoke to him, but he saw teaching students of color as important.

Even after Mr. Wilson left teaching elementary school to become an administrator in middle and high school, when he returned to the elementary classroom he says, "I was right back in the same situation I was in," working in schools whose families earned low incomes and were predominantly people of color. However, Mr. Wilson differs from Mr. D and Mr. Stacey in that he did not discuss other teachers sending their students with behavior issues to him. Mr. Wilson never said he was the behavior specialist at his school, though he described situations for which you may conclude that is was so, and even that he accepted his role as such.

For instance, when Mr. Wilson took over as Edger Allen's PE teacher, he says he used activities such as basketball to give students what they need. He said, "That kid might need more discipline. That kid might need a little bit more sportsmanship. That kid might need to learn how to share a little bit more. That kid might need to learn how have a little bit more responsibility. It's up to you to try to teach those things."

To me, the list of things Mr. Wilson tries to teach through basketball, all seem like content produced by a behavior specialist. I would like to note that I believe they are items that should be taught, and I am glad Mr. Wilson has found a creative way to teach them through a game that many students enjoy playing. However, it occurred to me that there can sometimes be a tension between the desire to recruit African American males and how they are utilized once they are in the classroom.

The study participants' portraits highlight the need for school administrators to be aware of how they position African American males in their school, so they do not perpetuate stereotypical notions of them as disciplinarians while overlooking them as effective educators. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) suggest that "little happens out of altruism alone" (p. 22), and some of the narratives shared by the study participants supports their claim. Each portrait contains at least one occurrence of interest convergence, which, even if unintentionally, advances racial injustice.

Interest convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) stands out to me the most in Mr. Stacey's experiences when viewing his portrait through a critical race lens. Charleston Southern promised to make Mr. Stacey "a better man," and all he had to do was attend their university as a football player. Mr. Steed, Mr. Stacey's first principal at Due North Elementary, recruited Mr. Stacey to teach from the substitute pool, then assigned him to a math remediation class, consisting largely of students with behavior issues. Even after acknowledging an AIG certification would qualify Mr. Stacey to teach more students with higher academic achievement, Mr. Steed continued to disproportionately assign the most challenging students to Mr. Stacey's class.

I learned from the three portraits that in recruiting African American males as elementary teachers, all students and their families need to see that African American males can be successful in a role that has been socially constructed as a career for White women. However, we must be aware when their value shifts from their ability to educate students, to a reliance on them to control students with behavior issues. All of the study participants are considered to be effective elementary teachers by others in their district, and they say their students demonstrate growth academically while they are in their classrooms. Yet, they did not tell me that teachers sent them students who were struggling academically, because they felt they possessed the requisite skills to turn students around academically. Instead, students were sent to their classrooms when other teachers could not or did not want to deal with them because of behavior issues.

What is more, each of the study participants led some form of extracurricular activity targeting students who needed some sort of additional support. According to an issue brief titled *Developing a Representative & Inclusive Vision For Education*, "Educators of color may also find themselves compelled to serve in additional support roles outside the scope of their position as educators" (The Hunt Institute, 2019, p. 6). Mr. D established the afterschool program, Power Up, for males in grades three through five. Mr. D says the males in his school needed something to help them with "leadership, cooperation, teamwork" and "academics." Mr. Stacey also had a group of boys who were in third through fifth grade, who were "a certain group of kids" recommended for him to reach out to try and make a connection. Mr. Wilson oversaw Edger Allen's track club,

which he used as a medium to educate students about things like time management, being more focused, being a good person, and doing the right thing.

For the study participants and many other African American males in the field of education, having advanced degrees and certifications is often a litmus test of their legitimacy for being in the classroom. Even though the study participants have advanced degrees and certifications, they are still often utilized as behavior specialists instead of education professionals. Unfortunately, it is a role that, due to their passion and love for their students, they themselves perpetuate. Still, the study participants' personal academic achievements, as well as how they can help their students achieve academically, offer promising counter-narratives to longstanding social constructs in elementary schools of White women as natural nurturing educators, and African American men as disciplinarians and otherfathers.

Money is Not Everything, But It Helps

Each of the study participants suggested that if elementary teacher salaries were higher, then maybe more African American males would choose to teach elementary students as their career. My review of literature found that teaching evolved into a vocation whose ranks are dominated by White women primarily because of the need for a low-cost solution to replace male educators who were leaving the profession for higher-paying jobs, furthered by "a growing number of educated women" (Montecinos & Nielsen, 1997, p. 48) who desired to work outside of the home. While calls for a raise in teacher pay continues to be for all teachers, at all grade levels, for all races and genders, in 2018 across all occupations "Black men earned 70.2 cents for every dollar earned by

White men," while "White women earned 78.6 cents" (Weller, 2019, p. 5). This means that on top of African American male elementary teachers being paid salaries which have been held intentionally low for nearly 2 centuries, they make 30% less than White men and close to 9% less than White women who hold the same jobs.

The financial inequities between African American male teachers and their White male and female counterparts are further exacerbated when the cost of their education is considered. When Mr. Stacey recalled how much he had spent on classes and to repeatedly take the Praxis, he remarked, "All this money just to get in the classroom, just to teach." Fiddiman, Campbell, and Partelow (2019) say, "Black teachers are more likely to borrow federal student loan money to fund their undergraduate and graduate education than their White counterparts" (p. 6).

While none of the study participants describe their undergraduate and graduate student loans as overly burdensome, they all utilized student loans in order to finance their education. Mr. D says that his mother returned surplus loan funds that remained after he had paid for tuition and living expenses and purchased his books. He says he is thankful that his mother was wise enough to return the surplus funds, otherwise his student loans would be even larger. Mr. Wilson was fortunate that Teach for America helped him to "repay some of the money he borrowed for his undergraduate degree."

The study participants are not alone when it comes to borrowing to pay for teacher preparation programs. According to Fiddiman et al. (2019), "91 percent of Black students . . . who trained to teach borrowed federal student loans, compared with 76 percent of White students" (p. 7). Additionally, "Black teachers were more likely to

borrow federal student loans for graduate school compared with Latinx and White teachers" (Fiddiman et al., 2019, p. 10). Fiddiman et al. (2019) posit that African American teachers are more likely to borrow federal student loans for graduate school, because they feel earning advanced degrees is necessary for them to get the best teaching positions with the highest wages. For the study participants, going back to school after they had already earned bachelor's degrees was not about career advancement, but entry into the career itself.

African American male teachers often have to hold advanced degrees to secure employment in the same jobs as their White counterparts, and even with their advanced degrees, "Black teachers experience the highest levels of unemployment among their peers" (Fiddiman et al., 2019, p. 10). When student loan debt from undergraduate teacher preparation programs and advanced degrees and certifications necessary to compete for teaching positions is coupled with earning 30% less than White males who hold the same positions, African American males who decide to become teachers may find themselves and their families struggling financially.

The participants in this study are not immune to the financial strain that comes with being a teacher. Mr. D says that he is personally "good financially," but "it comes times . . . somebody in my family need money." Mr. D told me that he has not learned how to say no when family members come to him in need of financial support. He said he would rather struggle for a couple of weeks than watch his family do without. Still, Mr. D says, "It's hard to get really financially stable when you're always having to help people financially around you."

Currently, Mr. D is single but says he can empathize with other African American males who have to support their immediate families on a teacher's salary. Mr. D has thought about starting a family of his own one day, and what that will mean for him financially. Mr. D has had to consider whether he would have to leave the career he fought so hard to be a part of if he starts a family. Mr. D says that if he gets married, then maybe together with his spouse, they will bring in enough income for him to continue teaching.

Unlike Mr. D, Mr. Stacey and Mr. Wilson do not have to speculate what it would be like to support a family on teacher pay. Mr. Stacey says when he first started teaching and was a newlywed, he worked part-time at a gym and GNC. Mr. Stacey told me he eventually noticed that the more money he made, the more he was paying in taxes. Mr. Stacey said that he had to "understand that the focus on life was not about working three and four jobs to make ends meet." Instead, Mr. Stacey started researching about financial literacy and budgeting. He says that until he started his journey towards fiscal responsibility, making ends meet was rough, plus he felt there was a "stigma of being head of the household," and not being able to provide for his family financially. After all, Mr. Stacey had dreamed since the time he was a little boy of playing in the NFL, and having "big money," large enough to support his parents along with his wife and children.

Mr. Wilson says that some African American males might look at teacher salaries and say "why . . . teach if it don't make money?," even if he does not feel that way. Still, he says that money maybe "a bigger narrative" for others than he had considered it for

himself. Mr. Wilson ponders what African American male children of teachers must think about the teaching profession when they see their teacher parents struggling financially. He says, “If we go to Disney World . . . we got to get the small box of popcorn. They’re seeing these perceptions too. Whereas they can see somebody else walk by, and they got a big box, and they’re saying, ‘We had to conserve. They don’t have to conserve.’” For Mr. Wilson, even the have and the have-not status demonstrated by what size box of popcorn teachers can afford is telling African American males “to not be as prepared to teach, because teaching is not a choice” for them as a career that will lead to financial security.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We need leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice. Not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity.” As much as the study participants say an increase in teacher pay might attract more African American males to teach elementary students, they all say money does not drive them.

Mr. D told me he was making more money at King Energy that he makes as a teacher; however, he says, “I am working here happy. My heart is happy. I’m content.” Furthermore, he said his focus now is “being that person to make a difference, being that person that my kids need to see, being that anchor that holds them down when they need it.” He went on to say,

> showing up sometimes is enough for me. The hugs you get . . . somethings are priceless . . . somethings money can’t buy. Showing a child how to love, you can’t buy that . . . money can’t buy happiness. Teaching, it’s rewarding. It’s so much more rewarding than money can offer.

Additionally, Mr. D believes that the teaching profession gives him the flexibility to return to the classroom if, in the future, he has to leave for financial reasons.

Mr. Stacey says teachers are "not in this for the pay." Mr. Stacey knew that as a teacher, he would not be living the lavish lifestyle he hoped he would as a professional football player, but he loved working with students so much that devised a plan to support his family on a teacher pay. Though Mr. Stacey would appreciate making more money as a teacher, he says he is a teacher because he is "trying to reach the bigger need." He told me he has turned down "higher-paying jobs" in the past because his "calling" and "purpose" is to teach.

One of Mr. Wilson's most vivid memories of college was a class he took at Morehouse College in which he recalls his professor saying, "Religion is one's ultimate concern, and that's what governs your life. Most people's ultimate concern is money . . . if your ultimate concern is money, that's what governs your life." Mr. Wilson says at the time he remembers asking himself, "would I do anything for money? Who would I put above money?" Today, Mr. Wilson is quick to tell anyone that God, not money, governs his life. Still, back when he a college student interning as a summer counselor, he was not sure "making more money" was his desire. Mr. Wilson told me that he would "much rather work and help kids . . . talking with kids, guiding kids" than make money. He says elementary students do not care how much money you have, but "they cared about how much you cared" about them. Even when Mr. Wilson did talk about money, it was in the context of him being a better fundraiser, so that he could buy new equipment for his students at school to use.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

For African American Males

There are professions in which African American males can help people be considered as intellectuals, all while making what many would consider a good living. However, I believe no career can positively impact the life outcome of others, more than an elementary school teacher. This study demonstrates that for African American males desiring to influence their communities constructively, elementary education is a promising career. The study's participants prove there are accomplished African American male elementary teachers who consistently seek to educate themselves so that they have the requisite tools to instruct their students. Each portrait acknowledges the existence of negative perceptions some have of why African American males desire to be elementary teachers, or of their pedagogical abilities. Still, the study clearly supports a reality in which African American men are beneficial for educating all students, regardless of race or gender. Though an elementary teacher's salary pales in comparison to that of a doctor or engineer, the study participants have shown that African American males can support themselves and their families financially.

For Colleges and Universities

Universities may be able to increase the number of African American males who choose elementary education as a major, by improving how they advertise their elementary education programs. The study participants offer compelling stories of how teaching elementary students has enriched their lives. Colleges and universities may consider including similar stories from African American male alumni who have

matriculated through their elementary education programs prominently on their websites and brochures. By allocating scholarship funding specifically for African American male elementary education majors, universities may create a situation where there is little to no student loan debt upon graduation. Since beginning salaries for elementary teachers are low, the ability to graduate from college with a small number of student loans, or none at all, could incentivize African American males to choose elementary education as their career. Additionally, colleges and university must strengthen their support of African American males whom they recruit into their elementary education programs. Two of the three study participants sat for the Praxis multiple times. Admittedly, both men say study aides were available for them but still found it difficult to pass the test. Colleges and universities must utilize their research resources to study why African American men have such a difficult time passing the Praxis exam and use the findings to develop strategies for improving the first-time success rate of passing the Praxis exam for African American males. They must also work to develop a mechanism for pairing their African American male pre-service elementary teachers with highly effective and experienced African American male elementary teachers who can mentor them through the challenges of teaching in elementary schools as an African American male.

For School Districts

School districts must be just as intentional in their recruitment of African American male elementary teachers now, as they were when they began aggressively enlisting White women in the late 1800s. In order to increase their recruitment of African American men to elementary education, school districts cannot continue to rely on

traditional employment efforts, such as job fairs at universities that only target education majors. This study's portraits have shown that highly effective African American male elementary teachers can be recruited from majors other than education. Additionally, the study indicates that many African American males graduate with college degrees other than education only to discover a hard time finding a job in their field. When school districts do not actively recruit from all majors, they may overlook potential African American males who would be outstanding elementary teachers. Some of the graduating students may be like this study's participants and not realize how much they enjoy teaching elementary-age students because they had not spent time in an elementary classroom since they were elementary students themselves.

School districts can budget funding designated to assist African American males with a college degree in a major other than elementary education to enroll in education preparation programs, pay for licensure exams, and provide a stipend to experienced mentors for them to assist with transitioning into the elementary school environment. In effect, school districts could develop recruitment and retention programs similar to Teach for America, where the nation's best and brightest African American males are trained to be teachers in elementary schools. Also, school districts must ensure their African American male elementary teachers are respected as instructional professionals and not relegated to the role of disciplinarian specialists.

Conclusion

I believe the three portraits from this study demonstrate the effectiveness of researching complex and sometimes personal issues through a "search for goodness"

(Lynn & Jennings, 2009, p. 181), using what Delgado and Stefancic (2012) describe as "the voice of color" (p. 10). The participants from this study not only answered the question of why they teach in elementary schools but also offered reasons why other African American males may not. Moreover, their counternarratives provide methods for overcoming barriers like accreditation exams, "gendered racism," and other socially constructed tropes about African American men, particularly those who teach in elementary schools. The study establishes that teaching elementary students can be a viable career for African American males. It also provides insight into how universities and school districts can recruit African American males into the profession of elementary education. The recommendations are a call to enlist African American males as elementary teachers by providing them with the financial, educational, and emotional support necessary for their success in the classroom.

Future research should continue to amplify the voices of African American males who teach or desire to teach in elementary classrooms. Qualitative research methods like portraiture can provide insight to the readers and to the participants themselves. Putman and Walsh (2019) said, "Increasing the talent pool of well-prepared teachers of color requires addressing a range of deep-rooted issues" (p. 11), many of which were not addressed in this study.

For example, how do we remove the perception that African American males who teach in elementary schools are somehow "weird," less masculine, or less intellectually talented than those who teach in middle or high schools? How can we raise the pay of African American males who hold the same positions as White male and female

teachers? What can be done to change the view of African American males as behavior specialists, while increasing the number of African American males who are AIG or other forms of academic specialists in elementary schools?

Personal Statement

If I had to describe the primary emotion felt through the process of conducting this study in one word, that word would be surprised. Most surprising to me was how nonlinear each participant's path towards the classroom was for them. In fact, I would even describe their paths as difficult. I am truly impressed by the extent to which each of them had to persevere academically, financially, and emotionally in order to enter a profession that historically has been overwhelmingly staffed by women.

I found commonalities between how they told me they grew up and my own childhood. Like Mr. Wilson's family, children were seen and not heard in my family as well. It is a philosophy that I espouse with my own children today, even if I do not verbalize it as prominently or frequently as my parents did. Mr. D grew up in a small town, as I did, and we both found ourselves at an HBCU and reminded by our parents to remember why we were there. Mr. Stacey and I both made a conscientious effort to learn what it meant to be a man from males in our lives who were not our birth fathers.

Still, the challenges Mr. D and Mr. Stacey had to overcome in their quest to become elementary teachers, and how long Mr. Wilson has been an elementary teacher, surprised me the most. As I listened to the stories of how these men became elementary teachers, I honestly could not see myself making those same sacrifices, at least not for a career in which my intentions and qualifications are often questioned because of my race

and gender. Yet, I am grateful for what these men endure because they love working with children like my two sons.

I may not have had an opportunity to have been taught by an African American male elementary teacher, but because of these three men, my sons and others like them will. Still, I have been wrestling with whether I should view the study participants and others like them as heroes. Ultimately, I landed on yes. Their willingness to face gender racism, endure unsubstantiated suspicion, often for low and unequal pay, is enough to make a case for heroism. They may not be fighting high rise fires, pursuing criminals in a high-speed chase, or raiding terrorist camps, but these men are risking their lives and the livelihood of their families.

When I go to work each day, I never think about how my interactions with students may be construed as anything other than appropriate. People do not see me as weird because I am an African American male chief operating officer. I can only imagine what it takes for the study participants, as well as other African American male elementary teachers, to get up and go to work every day in that type of environment. However, through this study, I learned that a great deal of the study participants' drive comes from their love for their students. It is a love that honestly, I sometimes forget about among the statutes, policies, and procedures I contend with each day. This study reminded me to get back into schools more so that I can see the students, and just as importantly, students can see me.

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APPENDIX A

IN-PERSON RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello, *(participant recruit name here)*, as a part of my requirements for earning a Doctorate in Educational Leadership, I am conducting a research study to examine why African American males decide to pursue elementary education as their career. I know that you taught elementary students in the past, will you be continuing as an elementary school teacher the upcoming school year?

- ***If the recruit answers yes:*** I would like to invite you to participate in my study. I will be using portraiture as the research methodology for the study, which is a qualitative method commonly used as a search for goodness. If you agree to participate, I will interview you during five (5) 60 to 90-minute sessions. During the interview, I will ask questions about why you desire to teach elementary, as well as how you believe your presence in the classroom effects educational and life outcomes of all students. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in one (1) 60 to 90-minute wrap-up meeting, to discuss your thoughts about your draft portrait. Your participation will be strictly confidential. Your name and identity will not be associated with the information you give. Do you think you are still interested?
    - ***If the recruit answers yes:*** Great. Let's exchange contact information, and I will send you the Consent to Act as a Human Participant form, which provides more detail about the study, your role as a participant, and my role as the Principal Investigator. I look forward to enrolling you as a participant, once you've had an opportunity to review the consent form. Thank you for your time and consideration.
    - ***If the recruit answers no:*** I am sorry to hear that, but thank you for time. If you change your mind or would like to discuss further, please feel free to contact me at (919) 358-1917, or jmmonk@uncg.edu. Thanks again for your time.
- ***If the recruit answers no:*** If you do not mind, I would like for you to share my contact information with other African American male elementary teachers you may know. They can reach me (919) 358-1917, or jmmonk@uncg.edu. Feel free to reach out to me if you change your mind about continuing to teach elementary students and would like to participate in the study. Thanks again for your time.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dissertation - Exploring Why African American Males Choose to Teach in Elementary Schools through an Examination of Their Portraits

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Dear Potential Study Participant,

I am conducting a research study to examine why African American males decide to pursue elementary education as their career. The research methodology for this study is portraiture, which is a qualitative method commonly used in a pursuit for goodness in a phenomenon. Interviews will be used to explore participant perspectives of their motivations to serve as elementary teachers. Study findings will be presented as participant portraits, intended to speak to diverse audiences through communicating the ever-present and consequential human element of education through storytelling.

If you agree to participate, I will interview you during five (5) 60 to 90-minute sessions. During the interview, I will ask questions about why you desire to teach elementary, as well as how you believe your presence in the classroom effects educational and life outcomes of all students. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in one (1) 60 to 90-minute wrap-up meeting, to discuss your thoughts about your draft portrait. Your participation will be strictly confidential. Your name and identity will not be associated with the information you give.

Please consider my invitation to participate by contacting me to be screened for your eligibility in the study. Please feel free to call or email me with questions you may have about the study.

Sincerely,

_____

Julius Monk
Principal Investigator
phone:919-358-1917
email:jmmonk@uncg.edu

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT FOLLOW-UP LETTER

Dissertation - Exploring Why African American Males Choose to Teach in Elementary Schools through an Examination of Their Portraits

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Dear Potential Study Participant,

Thank you for your interest in being a study participant. I greatly appreciate you taking the time to offer your participation in support of this study. At this time, the desired number of study participants has been reached, and your involvement is not necessary.

Again, thank you for your time, and best wishes with your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

_____

Julius Monk
Principal Investigator
phone:919-358-1917
email:jmmonk@uncg.edu

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

Project Title: Exploring Why African American Males Choose to Teach in Elementary Schools through an Examination of Their Portraits

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: Julius Monk, Principal Investigator and Dr. Craig Peck, Faculty Advisor

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?
This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to examine why African American males decide to pursue elementary education as their career. By gaining insight into the lived experiences of African American male elementary teachers, this study sets out to provide information universities, school districts, and policy makers may find helpful in recruiting, supporting, and retaining African American males as elementary teachers.

Why are you asking me?
You have been selected as a study participant because you meet all the following criteria:

1. African American
2. Male
3. Currently serve as an elementary teacher
4. Plan to return to teach elementary students next year
5. Considered by others to be highly effective in educating all students

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
As a study participant, you will participate in a minimum of five (5) 60 – 90-minute interview sessions, and one (1) 60 – 90-minute debriefing session. Additionally, there may be the need for intermittent follow up questions, which may take place via telephone, email, or brief face to face meeting. As a participant, you are expected to answer each question honestly and to the best of your ability.

Is there any audio/video recording?
To facilitate transcription of participant(s)' responses, all interview sessions, as well as debriefing sessions, will be audio recorded. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.

What are the risks to me?
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Julius Monk, Principal Investigator who may be reached at (919) 358-1917 and jmmonk@uncg.edu, or Dr. Craig Peck, Faculty Advisor who may be reached at (336) 908-7262 and c_peck@uncg.edu.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
Your participation is this study may inspire new ideas for recruiting, supporting and retaining African American male elementary teachers; which in turn might improve the educational and life outcomes of all students. Additionally, participant portraits can bring a larger audience to the voices of African American males who have chosen a career in which they represent a very small minority as members of the workforce and as research participants.

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?
All participant information will be kept confidential by using confidential data collection and dissemination procedures, such as using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. Data collected will be stored in a locked file cabinet, or password protected and encrypted electronic filing using Box, until 5 years after completion of the study. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this study described to you by Julius Monk, Principal Investigator.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDE

PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

The following questions are designed to begin exploration in the lived experiences of study participants. The Principal Investigator (PI) will begin each participant's initial interview session with the statement, "Tell me the story of your life." The questions that follow will be asked if the PI is unable to ascertain their answers from participants' response to the opening interview statement.

Participants' Experiences as PK – 12 Grade Students

4. Describe for me your experience as an elementary school student.
5. How did this experience change as you entered secondary school?
6. Tell me about the teacher(s) that had an impact on you the most.
    a. What was it about (him, her, them) that had the impact?
7. Tell me about the first time you had an African American male teacher.
    a. How were your experiences as a student compare when you had an African American male teacher to when your teachers were not African American males?
    b. What do you remember most about your African American male teachers?
        i. Why is that what you remember most?
8. Who was your hero growing up?
    a. Why did you look up to him/her?
9. What did you want to be growing up?
    a. Why did you choose that profession?

Participants' Experiences as Higher Education Students

4. Where did you attend college or university?
5. Tell me about your experiences there.
6. How were you treated by your professors?
    a. How did treatment by professors in your major differ from other professors who taught you?
7. How were you treated by peers?
    a. How did treatment by peers in your major differ from peers outside your major?
8. How would you describe your college's teacher preparation program?
    a. What support was available from the teacher prep program to help you finish college or university?
        i. How often did you take advantage of the support?
        ii. What effect did it have on you completing the program?
    b. What support did you receive outside of your college or university?
        i. How did that support help you complete your education program?

9. Tell me about your student teaching experience.
    a. Describe the school.
    b. How was your placement there chosen?
    c. What did you learn as student teacher that you believe is of most benefit to you now as a full-time teacher?
    d. What support did you receive from your college or university during your student teaching?
    e. How the district and or school where you completed your student teaching support you?
    f. What could have been done to improve your experience as a student teacher?

Participants' Experiences as Educators

4. How many years have you taught elementary school?
5. Describe for me the moment you knew elementary education was the career for you.
6. Tell me about your experiences as an elementary teacher.
7. Describe to me reactions of your student's families when they meet you for the first time.
    a. What do you contribute their reaction to?
8. Describe your school's teaching staff.
9. Overall, males represent less than 25% of teachers in the United States, with African American males making up less than 2%. What is more, only 3-5% of teachers of young children are male. What is your reaction to those statistics?
10. Some might say women, and White women in particular, dominate early childhood education. What are your thoughts about so few African American male early childhood educators?
11. How do you see yourself contributing to the success of all students?
12. What factors are you aware of that prevent other African American males from pursuing careers in early childhood education?
13. What kind of interest have your past or present African American male students expressed to you about their own desires to become a teacher?
    a. How much do you attribute their interest to seeing you teach?
14. What do you enjoy most about teaching elementary students?
15. What, if anything, would cause you to leave elementary classrooms?
16. Tell me about thoughts you may have to increase the number of African American males who persist as elementary teachers.

Closing

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?